

Understandings of emotional abuse

A qualitative study on how emotional abuse is understood in a child welfare context

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FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND ARTS

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to deepen understanding, expand knowledge, and gain nuanced insights into how emotional abuse (EA) is understood in child welfare work. This aim is discussed within the context of child welfare work and related to the status of knowledge as well as the theories of profession, professional discretion, and the notions of conceptual and contextual coherence. These concepts can help illuminate how child welfare workers organize and construct knowledge into descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA. By applying theoretical perspectives on child abuse and violence, the thesis further sheds light on how these perspectives affect which knowledge is considered valid in the structural and epistemic dimensions of discretion when developing a professional understanding of EA.

This thesis is positioned within the qualitative research tradition and comprises three articles. The first article is a scoping review of the definitions and descriptions of EA in the international research literature on child welfare and social work. The second article explores how child welfare workers describe and understand EA in focus group interviews, while the third article investigates how EA is described and considered in child welfare documents. The methods for data analysis in the articles vary and include thematic synthesis, reflexive thematic analysis, and qualitative content analysis.

The findings shed light on that the knowledge base of EA is ambiguous and lacking because of how terminology, definitions and operationalizations of EA vary in the literature, legislation, and political regulations across various contexts. Additionally, there is a lack of research on EA from the perspectives of children, parents, and professionals. The findings illuminates that child welfare workers describe EA as an unfamiliar and diffuse concept which they find difficult to articulate their knowledge about. Abstract concepts, theories and knowledge about EA is, thus, challenging to apply to the different tasks of child welfare work. Moreover, the findings show that there is an unawareness of EA in child welfare work, and a lack of professional

discussions about EA. In child welfare workers' efforts in organizing and constructing knowledge about EA, they lean on rights, norms, and values within child welfare services. Moreover, the findings point out that the descriptions, considerations and understandings of EA are organized around the knowledge and norms embedded in the concept emotional care, the zero-tolerance ideal against child abuse and violence, and children's right to participate. The thesis discusses which unintended consequences this may have for child welfare work and, thus, for the children in need of support. The thesis further illuminates that child welfare workers must balance different perspectives on child abuse and violence when performing their work with EA.

Overall, the thesis argues for a need for a more comprehensive and nuanced knowledge base of EA to enable child welfare workers to sufficiently engage with this concept in their work. It further argues for a need for professional discussions and critical reflections of how child welfare workers select, combine, and compare knowledge from the structural and epistemic dimensions of profession when understanding EA. In this way, critical reflection has the potential to support child welfare workers in organizing and constructing knowledge about EA to be relevant for their profession. The thesis contributes to the ongoing dialogue about how to strengthen child welfare work with abuse and violence. It also contributes to the discussions about the need to develop concepts that focus on the breadth of children's experiences of abuse and violence. The thesis further lays a foundation for further research and knowledge development on the topic.

Sammendrag på norsk

Formålet med denne avhandlinga er å utdype forståelse, utvide kunnskap og bidra til en mer nyansert innsikt i hvordan psykisk og emosjonell vold (EA) forstår i en barnevernskontekst. Formålet diskutes innenfor arbeid i barneverntjenesten, og ses i sammenheng med temaets kunnskapsstatus, teorier om profesjon, profesjonelt skjønn og begrepene 'conceptual coherence' og 'contextual coherence' (Muller, 2009). Dette kan belyse hvordan ansatte i barneverntjenesten organiserer og konstruerer kunnskap som de baserer sine beskrivelser, vurderinger og forståelser av EA på. Ved å også ta i bruk teoretiske perspektiver på vold og overgrep mot barn, peker funnene i avhandlinga på at disse perspektivene påvirker hvilken kunnskap om EA som anses som gyldig i den strukturelle og epistemiske dimensjonen av profesjonelt skjønn. Dette påvirker igjen de profesjonelles forståelser av EA.

Avhandlinga er posisjonert innenfor den kvalitative forskningstradisjonen og består av tre artikler. Den første artikkelen er en omfattende gjennomgang av definisjoner og beskrivelser av EA i internasjonal forskningslitteratur om barnevern og sosialt arbeid. Den andre artikkelen utforsker hvordan ansatte i barneverntjenesten beskriver og forstår EA i fokusgruppeintervjuer, mens den tredje artikkelen undersøker hvordan EA beskrives og vurderes i barnevernsdokumenter. Metoder for dataanalyse varierer mellom artiklene, og inkluderer tematisk syntese, refleksiv tematisk analyse og kvalitativ innholdsanalyse.

Funnen tyder på at kunnskapsbasen til EA er tvetydig og mangelfull på grunn av at terminologi, definisjoner og operasjonaliseringer av EA varierer i litteratur, lovverk og politiske reguleringer, og på tvers av kontekster. I tillegg er det mangel på forskning på EA fra barn, unges, foreldres, og profesjonelles perspektiv. EA beskrives videre som et uvant og diffust begrep som ansatte i barneverntjenesten har vanskelig for å beskrive og sette ord på. Funnen peker på at ansatte i barneverntjenesten opplever at det er utfordrende å anvende abstrakte begreper, teorier og kunnskap om EA i de ulike arbeidsoppgavene i barneverntjenesten. Samtidig viser funnen at det er liten

bevissthet om EA som fenomen i arbeid i barneverntjenesten, og at det er mangel på profesjonelle diskusjoner om EA. Funnene belyser videre at i barneverntjenestens arbeid med å organisere og konstruere kunnskap om EA på en måte som er nyttig for deres profesjon, tar de i bruk overordnede rettigheter, normer og verdier innenfor barnevernkonteksten når de skal forstå EA. Beskrivelsene av EA er i stor grad organisert rundt kunnskapen og normene som ligger i begrepet emosjonell omsorg, nulltoleranseideallet mot vold og overgrep, samt barns rett til medvirkning. Avhandlinga diskuterer hvilke utilsiktede konsekvenser dette kan ha for barna de møter i sitt arbeid, og for arbeid i barneverntjenesten. Funnene peker også på at ansatte i barneverntjenestene må balansere ulike perspektiver på vold og overgrep i sitt arbeid med EA.

Samlet sett argumenterer avhandlingen for et behov for en mer omfattende og nyansert kunnskapsbase om EA for å kunne arbeide med denne formen for vold på en tilstrekkelig måte. Det er et behov for faglige diskusjoner og kritiske refleksjoner knyttet til hvordan ansatte i barneverntjenesten velger ut, kombinerer og sammenligner kunnskap både fra den strukturelle og epistemiske dimensjonen av profesjonelt skjønn når de utvikler en forståelse av EA. Kritisk refleksjon knyttet til dette kan støtte ansatte i barneverntjenesten i å organisere og konstruere kunnskap om EA, og gjøre kunnskapen relevant for deres profesjon. Avhandlinga bidrar til den pågående dialogen om hvordan man kan styrke barneverntjenestens arbeid med vold og overgrep. Den bidrar også til diskusjonene om behovet for å utvikle begreper som ivaretar bredden av barns opplevelser av vold og overgrep. Avhandlinga legger et godt fundament for videre forskning og kunnskapsutvikling om barnevernstjenestens arbeid med EA.

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Trondheim, May 2024,

Sigrid

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children	APSAC
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	CDC
Child Welfare Services	CWS
Child Welfare Workers	CWWs
Data Protection Impact Assessment	DPIA
Emotional Abuse	EA
Emotional Maltreatment	EMT
Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research	SIKT
The Norwegian Centre for Research Data	NSD
The Norwegian Directorate of Family Affairs	Bufdir
United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child	UNCRC
World Health Organization	WHO

List of original articles

1. Ness, S. (2022). A narrow focus in research on emotional abuse. A scoping review of definitions and descriptions on emotional abuse in research on child welfare and social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12967>
2. Ness, S. (2023). 'It's not like we use the word emotional abuse.' A study of how Norwegian child welfare workers describe and understand emotional abuse of children. *Child abuse & Neglect* 146.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chabu.2023.106504>
3. Ness, S. & Paulsen, V. Emotional abuse, an invisible aspect in Norwegian child welfare documentation. *Under review for publication.*

1 Introduction

This thesis aims to deepen understanding, expand knowledge and gain nuanced insights into how emotional abuse (EA¹) is understood in child welfare work. In this chapter, I first elaborate on the reasons and arguments for choosing this specific topic and context of this thesis. After this, I present the aims and research questions before I clarify the main concepts used throughout the articles and the thesis. Finally, I describe the outline of the thesis.

1.1 Relevance of my research

There are several reasons why I have chosen to focus on the *topic of EA* for my thesis. First, I have chosen this topic because, together with emotional maltreatment (EMT) and neglect, EA is the least recognized and addressed of the different forms of maltreatment, that is, physical abuse, EA, sexual abuse, neglect, and children experiencing or witnessing domestic abuse and violence (Brassard et al., 2020; Kloppen et al., 2015; Kojan et al., 2020; Meinck et al., 2016; Stolthenborg et al., 2015). This has been the case in research, policy, and practice (Brassard et al., 2020; Kloppen et al., 2015; Kojan et al., 2020; Ottosen et al., 2020). Despite limited recognition, EA and EMT are the forms of maltreatment with the highest incidence and prevalence (Stolthenborgh et al. 2015). EA and EMT occur with every other form of maltreatment as an essential underlying component, either in parental action or in the outcomes for the affected children (Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018; Vachon et al., 2015). It has been shown that there is a high degree of correlation between EA and physical abuse and violence against children (Finkelhor et al., 2009; Kruse & Bergman, 2014) and that EA worsens the effect of physical and sexual abuse and violence (Teicher et al., 2022). As such, it is important to recognize EA both as a standalone form of

¹ In the present thesis EA is understood mainly as a synonym to the Norwegian concept *psykisk vold*, or *psychological violence*. I also consider EA as one element of the concept emotional or psychological maltreatment. The concepts and definitions underpinning this thesis are described and discussed in chapter 1.3, 7.4, and in articles 2 and 3.

maltreatment, and as an element of other forms of maltreatment (Brassard, 2019; Hart et al., 2018).

Second, I chose the topic of EA because it reflects a societal problem, as well as a problem at the individual level (Aadnanes, 2020; Brassard et al., 2019; Brassard et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2018). There are numerous studies demonstrating that EA and EMT are as harmful as other forms of maltreatment (Brassard, 2019; Spinazolla et al., 2014; Teicher et al., 2022) and that experiences with EA and EMT are likely to have wide-ranging and long-lasting negative impacts on the psychological and physical health and development of children and youths (e.g., Abajobir et al., 2017, Liu et al., 2017; Naughton, 2017; Schaefer et al., 2018; Vachon et al., 2015). The severity of EA, emotional neglect, and domestic abuse has also been recognized in the extensive literature on adverse childhood experiences (Asmussen et al., 2020; Felitti, 2019; Kirkengen & Næss, 2021) as well as in research including qualitative interviews with youths and young adults with experiences of abuse and violence (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2018; Øverlien, 2012). To prevent and intervene in these cases, EA and EMT are worthy of attention (Brassard, 2019; Brassard et al., 2020; Trickett et al., 2009). It is, however, challenging to reduce the impact of these forms of maltreatment because they are difficult to define and understand across historical, cultural, and social contexts (Baker et al., 2021; Glaser, 2002, 2011; Slep et al., 2022).

The abovementioned reasons for choosing the topic of EA relate to the arguments for why I have chosen to direct my attention to *how EA is understood in the context of child welfare work*. First, I chose to explore this topic within this specific context because of the central aim of Norwegian welfare policy and legislation, which emphasize children's right to a life free from all forms of abuse and maltreatment (BLD, 2016; the Children Act, 1981; the Child Welfare Act, 2021; United Nations, 1989). In this way, the law clearly states a zero-tolerance ideal for all forms of abuse, violence, and maltreatment, including EA (the Children Act, 1981; the Child Welfare Act, 2021; the Penal Code, 2005). In the work of preventing and protecting children from abuse

and maltreatment, the Child Welfare Services (CWS) play a central role because this is considered one of their core mandates.

Second, I have chosen to explore how EA is understood in the context of child welfare work because, despite the zero-tolerance ideal, cases of abuse, violence, and maltreatment represent a great proportion of the caseload in the CWS. Of the 49,778 reports of concern received by the CWS in 2022, 38% were categorized as different forms of abuse and maltreatment (Statistics Norway, 2024a). Of these, 6.5% were categorized as EMT, increasing from 2.7% in 2014. Of the 37,936 investigations started by the CWS in 2022, 45% were related to abuse, violence, and maltreatment. More specifically, 14.5% of the investigations involved physical maltreatment, 8% involved EMT, 20.5% involved domestic abuse and violence, and 2.5% involved sexual abuse (Statistics Norway, 2024b). The large proportion of investigations based on different forms of abuse, violence, and maltreatment is, however, not reflected in the decisions of measures implemented by CWS. Almost 14% of the measures implemented by the CWS in 2022 were based on abuse, violence, and maltreatment. 3.9% of the decisions were based on physical maltreatment, 2.8% on EMT, 6.6% on domestic abuse and violence, and 0.3% on sexual abuse (Statistics Norway, 2024c).

The disproportion numbers between the reports of concerns and the decisions on measures based on child abuse and violence is a known problem from earlier studies (Bredal et al., 2023; Havnen et al., 2020; Kojan et al., 2020; Norwegian Board of Health Supervision, 2019). Despite this disproportionality and the fact that abuse and violence ‘disappears’ from reports of concerns to decisions about measures (Bredal et al., 2023; Kojan et al. 2020), the outlined statistics illuminate the caseload of abuse and violence in CWS. Moreover, these statistics explain the variance relating to EA only to a limited extent, because EA is not a specific category in the statistics. It is thus unclear how EA is addressed and recognized in statistics. This is also argued by Kojan et al. (2020), who suggested that there is a lack of clarity in how CWS categorize different forms of abuse and violence into specific categories. In this way, varying terminology,

operationalization, and conceptualizations of EA complicate an understanding of how many cases in the child welfare are categorized as EA, or how many decisions are made based on EA. Despite this, the statistics acknowledge that child welfare workers encounter children who experience EA and EMT in their day-to-day work.

A third argument for exploring how EA is understood in child welfare work relates to the abovementioned challenges in how to understand, define, and identify EA (Aadnanes, 2020; Baker et al., 2021; Glaser, 2002, 2011; Slep et al., 2022). These challenges are also often expressed by practitioners in child protection and child welfare (Baker et al., 2021; Iwaniec et al., 2007; North, 2017). As such, EA is often underrecognized and underaddressed by professionals who interact with children who are facing mental health challenges, behavioral and developmental issues, and by systems such as child welfare and legal systems (e.g., Baker et al., 2021; Glaser, 2002; Slep et al., 2022; Tonmyr et al., 2011). The challenges of understanding EA also depend on the historical, cultural, and social context in which it is understood (Aadnanes, 2020; Glaser, 2011; Munro, 2020). What is considered EA in some contexts can, thus, be considered acceptable parenting practices and norms for child rearing in other contexts (Baker et al., 2021; Brassard et al., 2019; Glaser, 2002, 2011; Hart et al., 2018). Additionally, many interactions involving EA may occur in normal family life and are not necessarily harmful to a child (Garbarino, 2011; Iwaniec et al., 2006). The variations between contexts of how EA is understood make it challenging to assess the boundaries between acceptable parenting, inadequate parenting, and emotionally abusive behaviors (Glaser, 2002, 2011; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). However, the literature has emphasized that EA is considered a persistent, chronic pattern of behavior that is a dominant feature of a child's life (Garbarino, 2011; Brassard et al., 2019; Glaser, 2002, 2011; Hart et al., 2018; Killén, 2021). Thus, it is the pattern that includes intensity, frequency and duration that results in behaviors being considered EA as opposed to poor parenting (Brassard et al., 2019; Glaser, 2002; Hart et al., 2018; Killén, 2021). Because of the abovementioned challenges in understanding and defining EA, child welfare workers encounter dilemmas when investigating and

assessing situations related to whether a situation can be understood as EA and how to consider the harmful effects of EA (Killén, 2021; North, 2017). This emphasizes the importance of addressing how EA is understood in the context of Norwegian child welfare work, to more effectively prevent and protect children from experiences of EA.

Finally, the choice to explore how EA is understood in child welfare work is related to a demonstrated lack of knowledge regarding how CWS engage in cases of child abuse and violence (Norwegian Board of Health Supervision, 2019; Norwegian Official Report, 2017:2). It also relate to a lack of research focusing on Norwegian CWS practice in cases involving child abuse, violence, and maltreatment (Kojan et al., 2020). Kojan et al. (2020) argue for a need for focused research on how child welfare workers understand and work with different forms of abuse and maltreatment. This is in accordance with that understandings and perspectives on different forms of abuse and maltreatment have implications for the response and assistance provided by CWS (Aadnanes, 2020; Aakvaag et al., 2016). Specifically, limited research has been conducted on how CWS understand and work with EA (Kojan et al., 2020). Because of the lack of research, the abovementioned challenges in understanding EA as well as how understanding affects responses from CWS, I argue that it is important to explore how EA is understood by child welfare workers to strengthen the aim of providing the right support at the right time to children experiencing abuse and violence, including EA.

In addition to the mentioned reasons and arguments for choosing both the topic of EA and the context of child welfare work, my choices relate to my personal interest in emotional and psychological safety for children and families, my educational background within special education, and my professional experiences with supporting families struggling in their communication and relationships. I have often reflected on the concept of EA and my uncertainties about what comprises this concept. I have further experienced that problems in families regarding communication, interactions, and relationships rarely have been connected to EA, despite a strong focus on child

abuse and violence and the quality of relationships in families. These experiences and reflections have been important when directing my attention toward EA and child welfare work. They have further led to curiosity and a desire to develop knowledge about EA, which can potentially contribute to the discussion of this concept, as well as to discussions on adjusted and tailored help to children experiencing EA.

1.2 Aims and research questions of the thesis

With reference to the reasons and arguments presented and discussed above, the overall aim of this study is to deepen understanding, expand knowledge and gain nuanced insights into how EA is understood in child welfare work. This overall aim is explored through the following three research questions:

- ✓ How is EA defined and described in research literature on child welfare and social work? (Article 1)
- ✓ How is EA described and understood by child welfare workers? (Article 2)
- ✓ How is EA described and considered in child welfare documents? (Article 3)

These three research questions are illuminated in the three articles at the core of this thesis. In this thesis I also aim to take a broader perspective and shed light upon understandings of EA in a more nuanced way than in the articles, emphasising how the articles are connected to the overall aim of this thesis. This is done by illustrating the coherence between the overall findings when discussing them by considering the study's contextual framework, knowledge status and theoretical framework in chapter 7. By doing this, my research hopefully can contribute with awareness and knowledge about EA, and emphasise the need to illuminate the breadth of children's experiences with abuse and violence.

1.3 Clarifications of concepts

In this thesis I explore how EA is understood in child welfare work. Across the articles and in this thesis, I use several main concepts. In the following, I will clarify these

concepts , which include EA, understanding, definitions, descriptions, considerations, CWS, child welfare work, and child welfare workers. By identifying, utilizing, and discussing them in further detail in this section, I strive to avoid ambiguity and enhance clarity regarding the content of these concepts.

Emotional abuse

In article 1, I explored the definitions and descriptions of EA in the international research literature, and in articles 2 and 3, I discussed my choices behind the conceptualizations of EA. In this section, I will synthesize the conceptualization of EA for the present thesis because it is an important backdrop for the discussions, implications, and conclusions provided in chapter 7.

The terminology and operationalization of EA and EMT follow the conceptualization of Brassard et al. (2019) and Hart et al. (2018). They utilize the descriptions and definitional framework of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children² (APSAC) (Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018). In article 1, this framework was found to be comprehensively used in research on child welfare and social work, and it is argued to be the most up-to-date and authoritative knowledge about what constitutes EMT as well as providing a comprehensive description of EMT (Brassard et al., 2020; Ottosen et al., 2020). Moreover, EA is considered a form of child maltreatment and is described as a part of emotional or psychological maltreatment. EMT, or psychological maltreatment³ , is further defined as follows:

² The conceptualization of EMT by APSAC share similarities with other conceptualizations presented in article 1. This operationalization of EMT includes EA and emotional neglect as two phenomena with similar characteristics but also distinctions. In other conceptualizations, these two concepts appear in two different forms of abuse and violence (Meinck et al., 2016)

³ The term “maltreatment” is not considered adequate in the Norwegian context because it is associated with severe, systematic violence not covering the milder forms of abuse and violence. The term “omsorgssvikt,” which can be translated to “neglect” is more common (Aakvaag et al., 2016; Isdal, 2018; Mohaupt, 2024). I argue that the term “emotional maltreatment” is appropriate to use in this thesis to illuminate both the distinction between and the similar characteristics of EA and emotional neglect.

a repeated pattern or extreme incident(s) of caretaker behavior that thwart the child's basic psychological needs (e.g., safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, respect) and convey a child is worthless, defective, damaged goods, unloved, unwanted, endangered, primarily useful in meeting another's needs, and/or expandable (Hart et al., 2018, p. 147).

Based on the conceptualization by APSAC, EMT is operationalized into the following areas: *spurning* embodies verbal and nonverbal caregiver acts that reject and degrade a child through belittling, degrading, shaming, ridiculing, singling out a child and criticizing, humiliating in public, and other nonphysical forms of hostile rejecting treatment. *Terrorizing* involves caregiver behavior that threatens or is likely to physically hurt, kill, abandon, or place the child or child's loved ones or objects in recognizably dangerous or frightening situations. Children experiencing domestic abuse and violence are included in this area⁴. *Exploiting/corrupting* refers to caregiver acts that encourage the child to develop inappropriate behaviors and attitudes (e.g., self-destructive, antisocial, criminal, deviant, or other maladaptive behaviors). *Emotional unresponsiveness* (ignoring) embodies caregiver acts that ignore the child's attempts and needs to interact, such as failing to express affection, caring, and love for the child, as well as showing little or no emotion in interactions with the child. *Isolating* relates to caregiver acts that consistently and unreasonably deny the child's opportunities to meet the needs for interaction and/or communicating with peers or adults inside or outside the home. *Mental health, medical, and educational neglect* are caregiver acts that ignore, refuse to allow, or fail to provide the necessary treatment for the mental health, medical, and educational problems or needs of the child (Brassard et al., 2019, pp. 5–7; Hart et al., 2018, pp. 147–149).

⁴ In the operationalization of EMT by APSAC, children experiencing domestic abuse and violence is included in "terrorizing," and, thus, as part of the concept of EA (Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018; Ottosen et al., 2020). Operationalization from WHO considers children experiencing domestic abuse and violence a standalone form of child abuse and violence (Meinck et al., 2016). It is not an agreement about whether children experiencing domestic abuse and violence should be included in EA, emotional neglect, or be classified as a separate form of child maltreatment (Aakvaag et al., 2016; Ottosen et al., 2020; Øverlien, 2012).

The outlined definition and operationalization of EMT involve both the EA (commission) and emotional neglect (omission) of children when attempting to comprehend EMT. EA is considered commission, which is actively harmful behavior, while emotional neglect is considered omission in terms of absence of parental warmth (Brassard, 2019; Brassard et al., 2019; Glaser, 2011; Hart et al., 2018). As such, spurning, terrorizing, exploiting, and isolating relate mainly to EA, while emotional unresponsiveness and mental health, medical, and educational neglect relate to emotional neglect (Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2017; Ottosen et al., 2020). However, EA and emotional neglect often overlap and have similar characteristics (Trickett et al., 2009). Thus, it is challenging to distinguish children's experiences with these two concepts, both in the literature and in child welfare work (Hart et al., 2018; Ottosen et al., 2020; Trickett et al., 2009). It is in this way not possible to investigate EA without considering the term emotional neglect. When it is not possible to distinguish between EA and emotional neglect, I use the term "emotional maltreatment" or the abbreviation "EMT."

Above, EA and EMT have been described in their "pure" form or as a standalone form of child maltreatment. In this way, the conceptualization above is narrow because it describes parental actions and interactions that comprise EA and EMT. This is useful when exploring descriptions, considerations and understandings of EA. However, it is important to acknowledge EA and EMT in a broad matter. This relates to that a child may experience one or more of the outlined areas of EA and EMT, and that these areas may be experienced in combination with other forms of child maltreatment (Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018). In this way, EA and EMT are often understood as co-occurring with, or acting as underlying elements in other forms of maltreatment, in parental action or in outcomes for the children (Glaser, 2011; Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018). Acknowledging a broad conceptualization of EA and EMT is also important because interventions aimed at preventing and protecting children from maltreatment will not be adequate until the components of EMT are recognized and addressed (Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018). As such, both the narrow and broad conceptualization of EA is useful in this thesis because it makes space for the definitions,

descriptions, and considerations gathered in the articles (articles 1–3; Chapter 6) as well as discussions of the findings in chapter 7.1-7.2, and the recommendations and implications accounted for in chapter 7.4-7.5.

Understandings; definitions, descriptions and considerations

In my work on how EA is understood in child welfare work, I have chosen to view the term understanding as an overall concept that involves definitions, descriptions, and considerations. According to the Oxford English dictionary, the term “understanding” means “to comprehend; to apprehend the meaning or importance of; to grasp the idea of” (Oxford English dictionary, n.d. understanding). In the present thesis, the term understanding relates to how EA is grasped by child welfare researchers (article 1) and child welfare workers (articles 2 and 3). Their understanding of EA is further illuminated by how EA is defined, described and considered. In this thesis, the term “definition” provides a variety of precisely formulated meanings or statements of EA, while the term “descriptions” involve a statement or account of the characteristics, significant features, details and utterances of EA (Oxford English dictionary, n.d. definition; Oxford English dictionary, n.d. description). The term “consideration” relates to how child welfare workers attentively think about, reflect on, and write about what experiences children have that might be considered EA, how these experiences potentially harm children, and what support children with such experiences needs (Oxford English dictionary, n.d. consideration).

CWS, child welfare work and child welfare workers

In the literature, CWS and child protection services are used interchangeably, even though they illuminate different welfare systems across countries (Gilbert et al., 2011).

In the present thesis, the term CWS is used because it relates to the Norwegian welfare state. The Norwegian CWS provides universal services for children and families as well as in-home and out-of-home services for families at risk or in need of targeted and tailored services (Gilbert et al., 2011; Pösö et al., 2014; Skivenes & Søvig, 2017). The mandate and purpose of CWS is further accounted for in chapter 2.2.

Because research has the potential to enable or constrain child welfare work, research on CWS is included in the term “child welfare work” (article 1; chapter 4). In this thesis child welfare work in CWS is managed by Norwegian municipalities and undertaken by child welfare workers. The terms “child welfare workers,” “caseworkers,” or “contact persons” are used interchangeably for individuals employed in the Norwegian CWS. I use the term “child welfare workers”. In 2022, there were 242 CWS in Norway, with altogether 7,200 employees. 84% were women, and 75% were educated social workers or child welfare workers. Other professionals, such as psychologists, family therapists, and kindergarten teachers, also work as child welfare workers. (The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, n.d; The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, n.d).

Child welfare workers must adhere to current legislations, conventions and political guidelines on the prevention and protection of children from abuse, violence and maltreatment. They perform different core tasks in CWS as described in chapter 2.2. In this thesis, child welfare workers are important participants, both because they take part in focus group interviews in article 2 and indirectly as authors of the child welfare documents included in article 3. In this way, they are considered active participants in this thesis and co-creators of the knowledge constructed regarding how EA is understood in child welfare work.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

The present thesis is organized into seven chapters, along with three journal articles. In *chapter 1*, I introduce the background and relevance, the aims, and the research questions. I have also provided a clarification of the concepts used across the thesis and the articles.

In *chapter 2*, I present the contextual framework, which includes an account of the overall values considering child abuse and violence in Norwegian legislation and policy. Furthermore, I present the Child Welfare Act, the CWS, and some overarching rights in Norwegian child welfare work.

Chapter 3 highlights the status of the knowledge and relevant literature that has informed this thesis and that serves as a backdrop for discussing the findings, implications, and contributions.

Chapter 4 accounts for the theoretical framework, which consists of theory of profession including professional discretion and knowledge as fundamental elements in child welfare work. The concepts of conceptual and contextual coherence are applied to analytically distinguish between how knowledge is organized and constructed into descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA. Also, theoretical perspectives of child abuse and violence are included to illuminate how they affect the descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA.

Chapter 5 presents the methodological approach and philosophical considerations, an account of the research process, and the methods used to gather and analyze the data. This is followed by a discussion of the quality of the research as well as ethical considerations.

Chapter 6 consists of a summary of the three articles that form the basis of the present thesis.

In *chapter 7*, I discuss the findings illuminated by the relevance of the research, the contextual and theoretical framework, and the status of knowledge. Chapter 7 also includes methodological considerations, an account of the implications and recommendations for research, policy and practice, and an account of the contribution of the thesis.

2 Contextual framework

In this chapter, I elaborate on legislative frameworks and overarching values of Norwegian child welfare work involving abuse and violence. First, I describe how the zero-tolerance ideal of child abuse and children is visible in legislation and policy. I further elaborate on the Child Welfare Act, which regulates CWS. Finally, I discuss how some overarching values and rights guide child welfare work. I do this to consider and capture the sensitivity, complexity, and situatedness of how EA is understood in the specific context of child welfare work (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018).

2.1 A zero-tolerance ideal of child abuse and violence

Both civilian and criminal legislation in Norway regulates child abuse and violence (the Child Act, 1981; the Constitution of the Kingdom of Norway; the Penal Code, 2005). The Constitution §104, third paragraph, underlines that children have the right to personal integrity, and Children's Act (1987) states a clear prohibition against the use of violence against children through the following expression: "The child must not be subjected to violence or in any other way be treated to harm or endanger his or her mental or physical health" (the Children's act, 1987, §30). The Children's Act (1987), §30, further emphasizes that frightening behavior "or other inconsiderate conduct toward the child is prohibited," and in 2010, the text was specified to also include violence and abuse carried out in connection with the child's upbringing. In the Penal Code (2005), the distinct types of offenses toward children are described, and §219, §282, and §283 include different forms of child abuse and violence as offenses toward children. Moreover, the mentioned paragraphs are important when it comes to combating all forms of abuse and violence in close relationships or domestic abuse and violence, including EA (Hennum, 2020; the Penal Code, 2005). However, EA is not specified as a form of abuse and violence across the legislative texts.

According to the laws above, Norwegian legislation has established a zero-tolerance ideal against child abuse and violence. In this way, the legislation complies with article

19.1 in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), and the general comment nr 13 describing childrens right to freedom from all forms of violence (Hennum, 2020, p. 336–337; United Nations, 1989; United Nations, 2011). Article 19.1 in the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) gives children protection against being exposed to violence or abuse from their caregivers in declaring the following:

States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child (article 19.1, UNCRC).

This provision requires that children do not experience any forms of abuse, neglect or maltreatment from their caregivers, and that abuse, neglect and maltreatment shall be addressed in legislation, administration, society and education. In general comment 13, the UNCRC Child Committee further emphasized that the phrase “all forms of physical or mental violence” means that no violence against children is legalized, despite the frequency, severity of harm, and intent to harm because these are not the prerequisites for definitions of violence (United Nations, 2011). This comment emphasizes that all forms of abuse and violence are included in article 19.1 (United Nations, 2011). In article 21 of the UNCRC, EA is defined and described as including the humiliation of children, making them feel worthless, rejecting them emotionally, isolating them, threatening them, and frightening or ridiculing them (United Nations, 1989). Children witnessing violence in the home are also specifically mentioned as a form of psychological violence, that is, EA (Hennum, 2020; United Nations, 1989). The definition of EA in UNCRC to a large degree coincides with the narrow operationalization accounted for in chapter 1.3. In other legislation, EA is not included as a term, defined or described in the legislative text (the Children’s Act, 1987; the Penal Code, 1987). The UNCRC, however, use a variation of terminology reated to EA.

Hennum (2020) noted that these are psychological maltreatment, mental abuse, verbal abuse, and psychological violence.

As outlined above, article 19.1 in UNCRC provides a wide area where children have a right to protection from all forms of violence. Article 19.2 in UNCRC further includes an organizational design for CWS to work against the abovementioned protection:

To ensure that children are protected against detrimental care, the protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programs to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement (United Nations, 1989, article 19.2).

With this organizational design, article 19.2 provides criteria for ensuring the required prevention and protection for children from experiencing abuse and violence (United Nations, 1989). However, from an enforcement point of view and, thus, for child welfare work, the prohibition and prevention of physical abuse will be easier than the prohibition and prevention of EA (Hennum, 2020). This relates to that EA is less visible and measurable than physical abuse which is easier to identify and document by those who experience it, child welfare workers, and other professionals (Aadnanes, 2020; Hennum, 2020). Although EA is considered illegal within the zero-tolerance ideal and Norwegian law, there are several challenges regarding the definitions of this form of abuse and violence in current legislation and political documents (Hennum, 2020). Additionally, the terminology, operationalization and conceptualization of EA vary within and between legislation and political documents. This seems to affect child welfare practices and CWS' ability to recognize, identify and intervene in cases of EA (Aadnanes, 2020), which I also pointed out in article 1. These mentioned variations are also challenging between disciplines and professionals because EA may be understood differently, for example, in a legal context than in a child welfare or psychological context (Aadnanes, 2020; Aakvaag et al., 2016). The constantly shifting understanding

of child abuse and violence, calls for a need for a continuous debate about the related concepts, including EA (Ministry of Children and Families, 2013). Bredal et al. (2023) further emphasises that the concepts related to child abuse and violence are weakly developed in the Norwegian context.

The zero-tolerance ideal against child abuse and violence is reflected in increased political effort to prevent and combat child abuse, investment in the dissemination of knowledge, work with attitudes and norms, and development of sufficient measures (Aadnanes, 2017, 2020; Bredal et al., 2023; Ministry of Children and Families, 2013; Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2021; Prop. 36S, 2023-2024). Along with this work, knowledge about the harmful effects of abuse and violence on children has also been emphasized (Aadnanes, 2020; Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2018; Kojan et al., 2020). The zero-tolerance ideal is argued to be a general norm, legally and socially because the detrimental effects of abuse and violence are considered common knowledge in Norway (Aadnanes, 2017, 2020; Bredal et al., 2023; Kojan et al., 2020). The general opinion in the Norwegian society is in this way that no child should experience and endure abuse and violence from their caregiver(s) (Aadnanes, 2017, 2020). Thus, Norwegian society is characterized by strong societal condemnation and efforts to abolish all violence against children. Despite this, the caseloads of CWS about abuse and violence are large, as outlined in chapter 1.1. Hence, it is challenging to prevent abuse and violence, and it is difficult to disclose violence because of various reasons for why children do not or are not able to tell someone about their experiences (Bredal et al., 2023).

CWS have a specific mandate of preventing and protecting children from abuse and violence. However, anyone who performs service or work for an administrative agency also has the obligation to report to the CWS if they are concerned that children may be experiencing any kind of abuse or neglect (the Child Welfare Act, 2021, §13-2). This reflects how the zero-tolerance ideal is a general norm and obligation, as well as a fundamental part of how child welfare workers engage with these cases. This ideal may,

however, create a paradoxical and demanding situation for child welfare workers because eliminating the risk of children being exposed to abuse and violence is challenging, and perhaps impossible (Aadnanes, 2017, 2020; Feyling & Øfsti, 2023). When the zero-tolerance ideal becomes a principle for practice, it can, thus, place limitations on the support system and lead child welfare workers to be more concerned with protecting children from potential risks, such as abuse, rather than considering what level of support families need (Aadnanes, 2017, 2020; Christiansen et al., 2019; Feyling & Øfsti, 2023). As such, Feyling and Øfsti (2023) and Aadnanes (2017, 2020) argued for the need for awareness and critical reflection about how norms, as the zero-tolerance ideal, may lead to unintended negative consequences in child welfare work.

The zero-tolerance ideal further requires a dichotomic definition of abuse and violence. This means that a definition of what constitutes abuse and violence needs to be clear about what children should be prevented and protected from (Feyling & Øfsti, 2023). As outlined above and in article 1, EA is termed, defined, and operationalized in different ways. Additionally, the understanding of EA varies because of the norms of accepted parenting between and within societies and cultures (Baker et al., 2021; Munro, 2020; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). This makes it challenging to come to a consensus of a professional understanding of EA, and creates a demanding situation for child welfare workers when it comes to understanding EA considering the prevailing ideals in Norwegian child welfare work as well as the norms for parenting practices in Norway.

2.2 The Child Welfare Act and child welfare reform

In Norway, the Child Welfare Act⁵ (2021) regulates public interventions toward children and families and provides authorities with legal power to intervene in the family through both voluntary and coercive or compulsory measures. The first Child

⁵ The work on the present thesis started in 2019, when the Child Welfare Act from 1992 was in force. This chapter, however, focuses on the new Child Welfare Act of 2021, to illuminate the current situation and make the discussions of findings relevant for the current time.

Welfare Act came into force in 1953. In 1992, this act was changed to strengthen children's rights and need for protection, and the law became more family and parent oriented (Falch-Erichsen & Skivenes, 2019). A rights-based approach to the care and protection of children was continued and entered into force on July 1, 2018, when the Child Welfare Act became statutory law for children (Prop. 73L, 2016-2017). As the law developed international human rights for children, parents, and other family members gained increased influence. In 2021, a proposal for a new Child Welfare Act was adopted, and a new Child Welfare Act came into force on January 1, 2023.

An aim of the Child Welfare Act of 2021 was that it should be rights based and that the child should appear as the main character in the law (Prop. 73L, 2016-2017; the Child Welfare Act, 2021). The focus should increase on preventive work, contribute to better child welfare work, and strengthen the legal security of children and parents. Through the new Child Welfare Act, the municipalities in Norway were given the administrative, professional, and economic responsibilities of the CWS (Prop. 73L, 2016-2017; Prop. 133 L, 2020-2021, the Child Welfare Act, 2021). Along with the new Child Welfare Act, a child welfare reform founded in Prop. 73L (2016-2017) came into force in 2022. Together, the new act and reform aimed to strengthen early intervention and preventive child welfare work, sufficient measures and interventions for vulnerable children and families, and cross-sectional work to provide children with better and more coordinated services (Prop. 73L, 2016-2017). Reaching these aims, however, requires comprehensive efforts, changes, and collaboration in the municipality sector for childhood and adolescence (Prop. 73 L, 2016-2017).

Several Norwegian official reports and governmental documents have argued for a need for increased competence in CWS (Ministry of Children and Families, 2017; Prop. 73L, 2016-2017; Prop 133 L, 2020-2021). CWS have been specifically criticized for not successfully protecting children experiencing the most severe abuse and violence and for a lack of competence in these cases. It has been demonstrated system failures and deficiencies in services for children with such experiences, and a lack of core competence in child welfare work related to identifying abuse and neglect as well as

systematic work, analysis, and documentation of professional assessments and justifications for measures, decisions, and conclusions in child welfare work with such cases (Norwegian Board of Health Supervision, 2019, 2022; Norwegian Official Report, 2017:2; the Directorate of Children and Family Affairs, 2018). Related to this criticism, Kojan et al. (2020) argued that CWS' lack of competence in cases of child abuse and violence can be understood in light of the rapid development of knowledge in the research field of child abuse as well as a lack of professional discussions about how this knowledge and research contribute to child welfare work.

Because of the criticism of, among other areas, CWS' work with abuse and violence, the new Child Welfare Act (2021) and child welfare reform include a strategy for increasing competence in CWS. This strategy focuses on child welfare workers' competence in investigating children's needs and ensuring the right help at the right time. It further aims to increase child welfare workers' competence with complex cases such as abuse and violence while emphasizing an increased focus on analysis, justifications of decisions, and choosing measures of family support that lead to changes (Ministry of Children and Families, 2017; Prop. 73L, 2016-2017; Prop 133 L, 2020-2021). Child welfare work is further expected to be knowledge-based in terms of being based on research, theory, and the experiences of children, parents and professionals, to be able to provide the right help at the right time (The Norwegian Directorate for Family Affairs, 2022). Child welfare work is further value laden and based on society's norms and values (Grimen, 2008; Kleppe, 2023; Kojan & Storhaug, 2023). Collectively, these factors should form the basis for professional reflection and work (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, 2019).

2.3 Overarching rights and values guiding child welfare work

The purpose clause of the Child Welfare Act (2021, §1-1) is to ensure the provision of appropriate help and care at the right time for children and young people who live in circumstances that are potentially harmful to their health and development. The law should further ensure that children and young people are met with safety, love, and

understanding and that children and young people receive good and safe care conditions (Child Welfare Act, 2021, §1-1). For this purpose, the mandate of the Norwegian CWS is twofold: a welfare mandate that refers to supporting children and families to prevent abuse and neglect and a protection mandate that involves taking coercive and compulsory action to protect children from maltreatment (Aadnanes, 2020; Falch-Eriksen & Skivenes, 2019). Järvinen and Mik-Meyer (2012) have argued that this twofold mandate is the most challenging, complex, and demanding paradox in child welfare work because it is necessary to both investigate whether a child is exposed to risk and establish a collaboration with families to provide sufficient help and support. As noted in chapter 2.1, this is argued to be specifically challenging in cases of abuse and violence (Aadnanes, 2017, 2020; Bredal et al., 2023; Feyling & Øfsti, 2023; Kojan et al., 2020).

According to the Child Welfare Act (2021), CWS are obligated to investigate referrals of concerns if it is reasonable to assume that there are conditions that may provide a basis for implementing measures in accordance with the law, §2-2 (Child Welfare Act, 2021). The law further point out children's rights to necessary child welfare measures in §1-6 and in chapter 3 (Child Welfare Act, 2021). The work in CWS is diverse and includes core tasks such as a) reviewing and assessing reports of concern, b) carrying out investigations into the child's care situation, c) making decisions about measures, d) preparing cases for consideration in the child welfare tribunal, and d) implementing and following up on measures (Child Welfare Act, 2021). When doing these tasks, the law and policy contain few specified procedures for how case work shall be performed, but rather describe a low threshold for continued involvement of the CWS. The purpose clause in the Child Welfare Act (2021, §1-1), however, describes some overarching rights, child welfare work shall adhere to. Some of these will be discussed in the following section.

The best interest of the child

In the Child Welfare Act (2021) §1-3, “the best interest of the child” is described as paramount in the Norwegian CWS. This right refers to that all decisions and actions involving children shall be based on “the best interest for the child” with the intention to provide them with a caring environment, stability, continuity, and healthy relations (Child Welfare Act, 2021; Gjerdrem, 2018; Skivenes & Søvig, 2017). “The best interest of the child” also includes that, if a child’s need for care is not compatible with the interest of parents, it is the child’s interests and needs that shall take precedence (Bunkholdt & Kvaran, 2021; Norwegian Official Report, 2012:5). Assessments of “the best interest of the child” must, thus, see the child in its context, and balance the perspectives of children and parents, and knowledge and legislation. Neither national legislation nor international conventions are specific regarding the content of “the best interest of the child”. This makes such assessments normative and changing between social, cultural, and historical contexts (Aadnanes, 2020; Bunkholdt & Kvaran, 2021). In this way, the knowledge base and normative understanding of professionals play an important role in these assessments (Aadnanes, 2020; Bunkholdt & Kvaran, 2021; Læret & Skivenes, 2023).

Children’s right to participate

In Norway, children are viewed as individuals with their own interests and rights, and their position in policy and legislation is strong (Child Welfare Act, 2021; Norwegian Official Report, 2016:6; Prop. 73L, 2016-2017; Prop. 84L, 2019-2020). This is reflected in §1-4 of the Child Welfare Act (2021), which emphasizes children’s right to participate as a foundation in child welfare work. Thus, children shall be involved in processes and decisions concerning them, and CWS have a specific mandate to include children’s perspectives by talking to the child and considering their view of the situation (Child Welfare Act, 2021). Children’s views should also be included in child welfare documents to illuminate how their perspectives are emphasized and whether the child has had a real opportunity to participate in decisions concerning them (Office of the

Auditor General of Norway, 2022-2023). Studies have shown that children often are involved in conversations with CWS, but it has also been demonstrated that child welfare workers find it challenging to sufficiently facilitate children's involvement and participation in accordance with the law (Christiansen et al., 2019; Norwegian Board of Health Supervision, 2019; Office of the Auditor General of Norway, 2022-2023; Ormstad et al., 2020).

Children's right to participate can be approached from "outside" or "inside" perspectives (Paulsen, 2022; Paulsen & Studsrød, 2019). An "outside" perspective includes assessments based on child welfare workers' perspectives on the child and on child welfare workers' knowledge of childhood, children's needs, and development (Paulsen & Studsrød, 2019; Warming, 2011). This perspective is required to make sufficient decisions, but to make individual assessments and acknowledge children's right to participate, an "inside" perspective is needed (Paulsen, 2022; Paulsen & Studsrød, 2019). An "inside" perspective can be aspirational, which means that child welfare workers assume how children experience specific situations without talking to the child (Paulsen, 2022; Warming, 2011). To acquire an "inside" perspective, CWS must, however, facilitate participation in terms of providing space for children's expressions, perceptions, experiences, and wishes (Paulsen, 2022; Paulsen & Studsrød, 2019; Warming, 2011). Despite an "inside" perspective on children's right to participate, it is crucial that decisions made by CWS take children's perspectives into account, but do not leave children with the responsibility for the decisions (Paulsen, 2022; Prop. 133L, 2020-2021).

Related to the strong focus on children's rights both in legislation and practice, the Norwegian CWS is described as child centric (Hestbæk et al., 2023; Røkkum et al., 2022). Despite its good intentions, the child-centric orientation of CWS is discussed because it may lead to a focus on protecting the child (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Røkkum et al., 2022). This is discussed against the risk orientation in CWS, which specifically focuses on the deficits of parents and children and aims to prevent and reduce

potential risk to children (articles 2–3; Backe-Hansen et al., 2017; Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Feyling & Øfsti, 2023). The combination of the child-centric orientation and focusing on problems and risks can lead to an individualization of the child, where the social and cultural context and relations are not sufficiently considered (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Munro, 2010). This approach has also been criticized because it leads CWS to be more concerned with clarifying the risk for abuse and violence rather than the need for support, as noted in chapter 2.1 (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Backe-Hansen et al., 2017; Christiansen et al., 2019; Featherstone et al., 2018; Munro, 2010).

Children's right to care, preferably in their own biological family

The Child Welfare Act (2021) §1-5 underscores children's right to care, preferably in their own biological family. This relates to the family-service orientation in CWS, to the mildest intervention principle (Child Welfare Act, 2021, §1-10), and to the low thresholds for implementing measures and prioritizing voluntary and preventive measures in CWS (Gilbert et al., 2011; Pösö et al., 2014; Skivenes & Søvig, 2017). The Norwegian CWS also initiate compulsory and coercive measures such as out-of-home care when deemed necessary. These decisions are based on court orders, being given by the County Social Welfare Board (Child Welfare Act, 1992) or the Child Welfare Tribunal (Child Welfare Act, 2021).

Children's right to care, preferably in their own biological family, emphasizes what is traditionally referred to as the biological principle. This has been an overarching value in Norwegian society and in practice in CWS, and it is founded on the importance of the biological ties between children and parents (Aadnanes, 2020; Eide, 2018; Child Welfare Act, 1992, 2021). Eide (2018), however, argue that this principle and value are challenged by CWS when assessing the relationship between parents and children. The biological principle is often discussed in relation to how it may come at the expense of "the best interest of the child." In the Norwegian Official Report (2012:5), the biological principle was evaluated, and the principle of developmental attachment was recommended for assessing the value of the biological relationship against the

principle of developmental attachment. It was also recommended that attachment quality should be a fundamental assessment topic in all child welfare work, a recommendation primarily based on perspectives from developmental psychology and, specifically, on attachment theory and mentalization theory (Eide, 2018; Hennum, 2023; Norwegian Official Report, 2012:5; Madsen, 2016). These perspectives and principles have strongly structured CWS work for the past decade (Aadnan, 2020; Hennum, 2023; Madsen, 2016). However, this has been criticized for being narrow, which may lead comprehensive assessments to fail to consider more structural conditions, such as cultural contexts and socioeconomic conditions, when assessing a child's situation and deciding on actions (Hennum, 2016; Lorentzen, 2019; Madsen, 2016).

The requirement of professional soundness

The Child Welfare Act (2021) §1-7 emphasizes that professional work in CWS should meet the requirements of soundness. This means that child welfare work must be professionally sound throughout case management and when initiating and implementing measures. Thus, justifications and decisions must be clear and transparent in child welfare documents because this is argued as being a prerequisite for both the legal security of children and families to be safeguarded and for enabling trust in CWS (Child Welfare Act, 2021, §12-5). The law does not provide a definition of soundness because it is changing due to recognized practices and knowledge in CWS, as well as legislation, knowledge from educational and research institutions, professional guidelines, and general societal and ethical norms (Bunkholdt & Kvaran, 2021; Norwegian Official Report, 2016:16; Slettebø et al., 2019).

To summarize, the purpose clause of the Child Welfare Act (2021) outlines several overarching rights that child welfare work should adhere to. These rights are theoretical and presented separately in the legislation, but as discussed above, they are mutually dependent and must be emphasized in varying ways when child welfare workers aim to understand the needs of the individual child in a specific context. The

rights are further changing across contexts, relying on which societal norms and scientific knowledge bases are considered professionally sound in CWS and in society in general. This makes them ambiguous and contradictory both between and within legislative, societal, cultural, and historical contexts.

3 Status of knowledge

Thus far, I have presented the relevance and contextual framework of the thesis. In this chapter, I present a status of knowledge on how EA is understood in child welfare work as a way to position my thesis in previous research. First, I present studies on the prevalence and consequences of child abuse and violence, with a specific focus on EA. Next, I present relevant research on child welfare workers' understanding of and work with EA. This should not be considered a systematic literature review but rather a scope of academic literature related to the stated aim. The literature I present have informed the research process and identified knowledge gaps that have had an impact on the topics of the articles. It also serves as a backdrop to discuss the overall findings of my research, as well as the contributions and implications of the thesis in chapter 7.

3.1 Prevalence studies of emotional abuse

EA prevalence studies are challenging because of the different methodological and conceptual conditions and thresholds researchers set for defining an incident as EA (Hart et al., 2018; Ottosen et al., 2020). To compare the prevalence of EA between studies and countries, the definitions and thresholds chosen for investigating EA need to be specific. In Norway, the prevalence of EA has been examined in three recent studies with different target groups (Dale et al., 2023; Frøyland et al., 2023; Hafstad & Augusti, 2019). Two of these studies used the term “psychological violence” to measure EA (Dale et al., 2023; Hafstad & Augusti, 2019), while one used the term “psychological violations from parents” as a synonym for “psychological violence” (Frøyland et al., 2023).

Despite varying terminology, the definitions and descriptions of EA were similar across the three national studies. Hafstad and Augusti (2019) emphasized using a definition and operationalization of EA that made it possible to compare their findings to international large-scale prevalence studies. They further described that psychological violence includes experiences of being repeatedly humiliated, ridiculed, belittled, or

threatened (Hafstad & Augusti, 2019). Similarly, Dale et al. (2023) reported that psychological violence includes experiences of being repeatedly humiliated, hurt, and ridiculed. Although Frøyland et al. (2023) used a different term, the description of “psychological violations from parents” coincides with the descriptions of EA in the other studies when it is described as “expressions meant to hurt, humiliate or scare the other person” (Frøyland et al., 2023, p. 16). Dale et al. (2023) emphasized that psychological violence is a caregiver action that conveys to a child that the child is worthless, deficient, unloved, unwanted, at risk, or valuable only to the extent that the child meets those of others’ needs. This is similar to the definition of emotional maltreatment (EMT) provided in chapter 1.3, which includes both EA and emotional neglect. All studies emphasized that experiences with psychological violence or violations involve a repeated pattern of actions that have great potential for harm (Dale et al., 2023; Hafstad & Augusti, 2019).

Regarding the prevalence rates, EA is argued to have an increased prevalence at the international level, and studies have demonstrated a greater prevalence of EA than physical abuse (Bellis et al., 2023; Dube et al., 2023; Swedo et al., 2023). The Norwegian prevalence studies have not demonstrated the same increased prevalence of EA or that the prevalence of EA is reported as higher than physical abuse and violence (Dale et al., 2023; Frøyland et al., 2023; Hafstad & Augusti, 2019). Frøyland et al. (2023), however, revealed a stable proportion of experiences of psychological violations from 2015–2023. Norwegian studies further demonstrated little variation in experiences with psychological violence or psychological violations, reporting a prevalence of 15% (Dale et al. 2023), 18% (Hafstad & Augusti, 2019), and 20% (Frøyland et al., 2023). Scandinavian studies have demonstrated that the prevalence of EA varies between 5.2% and 23% (Jernbro & Jansen, 2017; Jernbro et al., 2015; Kloppen et al., 2015). The Norwegian studies are within this range, but at a high level.

Hafstad and Augusti (2019) demonstrated a marked increase in psychological violence in adolescence, while Frøyland et al. (2023) reported that youths reported more

psychological violations from mothers than fathers. Hafstad and Augusti (2019) and Frøyland et al. (2023) further reported that youths reporting psychological violence or violations were more likely to report physical abuse, which is consistent with other Scandinavian studies demonstrating the co-occurrence of different forms of abuse and violence (e.g., Armour et al., 2014; Jernbro et al., 2015). Hafstad and Augusti (2019) and Frøyland et al. (2023) revealed that it was more common for young people who had been exposed to psychological violence and psychological violations to have experienced violence or abuse between their parents (Frøyland et al., 2023). Hafstad and Augusti (2019), however, suggested that it was more common that youths had experienced psychological violence than physical abuse between caregivers.

The studies by Hafstad and Augusti (2019) and Frøyland et al. (2023) demonstrated that more girls than boys reported experiences with psychological violence or psychological violations, and girls more often than boys reported experiences with several forms of abuse and violence. Similarly, Dale et al. (2023) reported that women had more experience with psychological violence and with several forms of different forms of abuse and violence than men. The studies by Hafstad and Augusti (2019) and Dale et al. (2023) also reported that vulnerability to abuse and violence and sociodemographic factors are closely linked. Hafstad and Augusti (2019) argued that children in socially disadvantaged families are more often exposed to violence than are those in families with high socioeconomic status. Hafstad and Augusti (2019) further demonstrated that youths who do not live with both parents or in out-of-home care, or youths living with parents who struggle with drugs, mental health problems, or criminality are more vulnerable to experiences with abuse and violence. This is also the case for youth with a disability. Youth with an immigrant background have an increased risk of experiencing abuse and violence (Hafstad & Augusti, 2019). Dale et al. (2023) further argued that experiences with abuse and violence in childhood lead to a vulnerability to gain similar experiences in adulthood.

Although certain background factors correlate with experiences with abuse and violence, it is difficult to determine which background factors correlate more strongly with EA. This might relate to the coexistence, co-occurrence, and complexities of experiences with abuse and violence. Frøyland et al. (2023), however, specified that psychological violations do not appear as an isolated phenomenon but rather as woven into more comprehensive problems in families. This has also been demonstrated in other Scandinavian studies (Armour et al., 2014; Jernbro et al., 2015; Jernbro & Jansen, 2017), and is emphasized in the broad conceptualization of EA and EMT in the present thesis (chapter 1.3). Thus, Frøyland et al. (2023) concluded that professionals working with children and young people need to be aware that psychological violations may indicate the presence of other forms of abuse, violence, and challenges with living conditions.

The Norwegian studies presented here included different target groups when investigating the prevalence of abuse and violence. Hafstad and Augusti (2019) investigated youth aged 12–16 years old, and Frøyland et al. (2023) investigated the scope and trends of child and youth abuse and violence among pupils in high schools during the period of 2007–2023. Dale et al. (2023) explored the prevalence of abuse and violence among adults aged 18–74 years but also examined adults' experiences with abuse and violence in childhood, making the study relevant for this thesis. As such, these mentioned studies contributed knowledge about the prevalence of youth's and adults' experiences of abuse and violence and of EA in childhood. However, to the best of my knowledge, there is no research about the experiences of EA among children under 12 years of age or among the Norwegian child welfare population, which is the context of the present thesis. There are also no studies on whether children and youths disclose their experiences of "psychological violence" to others. This is also argued in a literature review on psychological violence by Ottosen et al. (2020).

3.2 Consequences of emotional abuse

EA is considered a global challenge, and the negative impacts and consequences of EA have been well documented in international research (see an overview in Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018). Moreover, these studies have demonstrated that experiences with EA and emotional maltreatment (EMT) affect domains such as intrapersonal thoughts, feelings and behaviors, emotional problems, problems with social competency, antisocial functioning, learning problems, behavioral problems, and physical health problems (Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018). The impact of EA has further been demonstrated to vary among different developmental stages, such as infancy, early childhood, school age, and adolescence (Brassard et al., 2017; Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018). The Norwegian studies presented above did not provide specific information on the consequences of EA but rather on abuse and violence in general (Dale et al., 2023; Frøyland et al., 2023; Hafstad & Augusti, 2019).

The studies by Dale et al. (2023), Frøyland et al. (2023), and Hafstad and Augusti (2019) demonstrated several negative health consequences in regard to both psychological and physical health. Dale et al. (2023) revealed that adults who experienced abuse and violence in childhood reported more symptoms of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress in adulthood (Dale et al., 2023). Similarly, Hafstad and Augusti (2019) demonstrated that youth with experiences with abuse and violence reported depression as well as “inner turmoil,” headaches, and lethargy. They also reported increased school absence and sleep problems (Hafstad & Augusti, 2019). Frøyland et al. (2023) found that youth experiencing abuse and violence reported increased use of drugs, violence, and problem behaviors. Moreover, studies have demonstrated a clear dose-response relationship between exposure to violence and abuse in terms of more experiences with different forms of abuse and violence and greater symptom burden (Dale et al., 2023; Frøyland et al., 2023; Hafstad & Augusti, 2019). They also revealed a negative association with reported quality of life and living condition challenges among

youths experiencing abuse and violence, and by adults reporting childhood abuse and violence (Dale et al., 2023; Frøyland et al., 2023; Hafstad & Augusti, 2019).

Although the abovementioned studies did not specify the consequences related to EA, one recent Norwegian study contributed valuable insights, exploring physical health complaints in adolescents and young adults with experiences with child abuse (Rueness et al., 2020). Based on a telephone survey of 506 adolescents with a history of child abuse, and 504 nonabused peers, the study emphasized that, despite the co-occurrence of several forms of abuse, sexual abuse and EA were significantly associated with physical health complaints. As such, Rueness et al. (2020) suggested that various forms of child abuse contributed differently to physical health complaints, emphasizing the importance of considering both the form of abuse and total burden of abuse both when studying physical health outcomes in research and when encountering physical health complaints in patients.

The studies focusing on the consequences of EA have mainly been based on quantitative research. However, a Norwegian study by Aadnanes and Gulbrandsen (2018) explored young adults' experiences with childhood abuse and violence through qualitative interviews. In the study, the participants described their experiences with caregiver acts, which were interpreted as psychological and emotional violence by the authors. Some of the participants labeled these experiences as "psychological violence," while others discussed them as hurtful and as the most hurtful experiences with abuse and violence (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2018, p. 602). The study, thus, added to the international literature by showing that EA is as harmful as other forms of abuse and maltreatment (Brassard, 2019; Brassard et al, 2020; Hart et al., 2018). Aadnanes and Gulbrandsen (2018) further discussed how "overlooking this area of abuse in researching may tend to reinforce the misconception of how EA is not as harmful as other forms of abuse and violence, and ultimately lead to overlooking the children and young people affected" (p. 606).

3.3 Child welfare workers understandings of and work with emotional abuse

Most of the research on child abuse and violence in Norway has not been conducted in the context of CWS (Kojan et al., 2020). Kojan et al. (2020) further have demonstrated that the available publications regarding abuse and violence most often focus on abuse and violence in general or physical abuse. According to Kojan et al. (2020), and in my efforts to find relevant literature, there are few studies concerning EA in the context of child welfare work. This is the case both in national and international research. The studies presented here, is mainly international studies.

Considerable research and conceptual articles involving the definitions of EA and EMT exist (for an overview, see Brassard et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2018; Slep et al., 2023). Article 1 in this thesis is a scoping review of definitions and descriptions of EMT and EA in international research on child welfare and social work. The body of literature of this article will not be repeated here, nor will a discussion of definitions and descriptions, as this is provided in the article. However, it is worth noticing that recent research and literature have argued that the definitions and definitional frameworks of EA and EMT are thorough and valid (Brassard et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2022; Hart et al., 2018; Slep et al., 2022). There is, however, pointed out a need to apply these frameworks to relevant practice fields, such as child protection and more preventive welfare services (Baker et al., 2021; Brassard et al., 2020; Slep et al., 2022; Glaser, 2002, 2011). Several studies have emphasized that unclear definitions and conceptualizations of EA have led to confusion among child welfare and social workers about how to understand and recognize EA as a severe and widespread form of maltreatment (Baker et al., 2021; Iwaniec et al., 2007; North, 2017).

Research on how EA is understood in child welfare work emphasizes that child welfare and social workers struggle to recognize, name, and intervene in cases of EA (Iwaniec et al., 2007). Iwaniec et al. (2007) found that social workers have difficulty describing what EA is, arguing that the challenges in naming and recognizing EA lead to an under-

recognition and underreporting of EA, which again leads to a delay in or lack of intervention in EA. A recent investigation of how the Norwegian CWS understands and handles cases of abuse and violence revealed that child welfare workers find EA to be diffuse, challenging to define, and less concrete than physical abuse (Bredal et al., 2023). Bredal et al. (2023) further demonstrated that child welfare workers seemed to have knowledge about the verbal aspects of EA, but they were less able to describe EA as a persistent element in the child's environment. They, thus, argued that, to handle cases of EA professionally, it is necessary to differentiate experiences of EA between separate incidents that violate the child who can be repaired and persistent episodes of violations and rejections. Bredal et al. (2023) argued that the concepts related to abuse and violence are weakly developed in the Norwegian CWS and recommended developing concepts that delineate between the dimensions of abuse and violence, such as form, frequency, severity, motives, and underlying causes (Bredal et al., 2023).

Glaser (2002, 2011) suggested that the challenges in recognizing and defining EA in child welfare work lead to professionals experiencing uncertainties in proving EA legally. This was also emphasized by Bredal et al. (2023), who demonstrated that child welfare workers found it especially difficult to explain EA in their meetings with the Child Welfare Tribunal. Additionally, North (2017, 2019a) found that social workers do not feel that they have the skills to provide evidence of EA to satisfy the legal system. Furthermore, social workers described working with the law with feelings of uncertainty and worries about judgment of their practice (North, 2019a). In her work, North (2017, 2019a) described how social workers felt that the law gives them powers and duties but that legal decisions are based on implicit notions of seriousness, and that the risk of harm from EA is not considered urgent by the legal system.

Research on how EA is understood in child welfare work has also highlighted how its co-occurrence with other forms of abuse and violence can challenge child welfare workers. Iwaniec et al. (2007) demonstrated that EA was underrecognized, underreported, and under investigated if more explicit forms of abuse were involved.

Glaser et al. (2001) argued that this may lead professionals to have an initial focus on more easily recognized forms such as physical abuse and, thus, an unawareness of EA. According to Iwaniec et al. (2006), it is difficult to disentangle components specific to EA when investigating other forms of abuse because of its discrete, intangible aspects. Additionally, North (2017) and Glaser (2002) noted that studies have shown that working with EA takes time and that addressing EA often requires longer periods of time to recognize than statutory work provides.

Another area emphasized in how EA is understood in child welfare work relates to how the nature of EA poses great challenges. This relates to how EA is more closely related to normative behavior than other forms of abuse and how perceptions about adequate parenting are influenced by cultural norms and values in a society (Baker et al., 2021; Iwaniec et al., 2006; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). According to Wolfe and McIsaac (2011), it is especially challenging for child welfare workers to decide where the boundaries between inadequate parenting practices and emotionally abusive behavior pose harm to children shall be. They further discussed that it is appropriate to understand parenting practices on a continuum, where constructive parenting is at one end of the scale and a parenting practice characterized by EA and neglect is at the other, with inadequate parenting practices somewhere in-between (Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). North (2017), however, discussed how the continuum of severity has been poorly delineated regarding EA because the law does not provide a clear direction and thresholds for interventions in these cases, thus arguing that a lack of clarity in the law may lead to an interrogation of how and why cases come to be recognized as EA.

North (2017, 2019b, 2022) further argued that social workers' notions of normality are important in their understanding of EA. As such, work with EA encompasses social workers' use of self, and they take varying approaches to their work. Social workers subjectivity further plays a significant and often informal role in how they designate a situation as emotionally harmful (North, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2022). North (2019b, p.842) further discuss that professionals' personal and subjective responses to families

can diminish professionals from building an evidential case about the presence of EA (North, 2019b, p. 842). This may result in a delay in deciding the severity of harm in cases of EA (North, 2017). As such, subjective responses and reactions related to EA should be critically reflected upon and carefully considered to carry out work with EA more effectively (North, 2017, 2022).

To summarize, there are relevant studies on prevalence both internationally and nationally demonstrating that EA and EMT are widespread. There is also extensive international research on the consequences of EA, while Norwegian research mainly does not consider the consequences of EA as a standalone form of abuse. A Norwegian study emphasized the severity of EA as perceived by youths and young adults. Furthermore, one national study and some international studies and literature on EA emphasizes conditions which makes it challenging for child welfare workers to recognize and intervene with EA. The present thesis is the first to focus specifically on how EA is understood in child welfare work, thus contributing to the research field of child abuse and violence by illuminating professionals understandings of EA as a form of abuse and violence. The thesis further contributes to knowledge developed in the context of child welfare work by emphasizing how different theoretical perspectives on child abuse and violence affect which knowledge child welfare workers base their descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA on, when exercising professional discretion in cases of abuse and violence.

4 Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I present an overarching theoretical framework that I find appropriate for illuminating the aim of this thesis. This chapter provides deeper insights into the theories I have used in the articles. In this chapter I argue that professional discretion and knowledge are fundamental elements in how professionals in Child Welfare Services (CWS) perform their work. To illuminate this, I apply theories of profession, professional discretion, and Muller's (2009) concepts of conceptual and contextual coherence to analytically distinguish between how knowledge is organized and constructed into descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA. Furthermore, I include theoretical perspectives on child abuse and violence to illuminate how they affect how child welfare workers understand EA. Finally, I summarize the theoretical framework into a model (Figure 1) that illuminates the relationships between the different concepts and perspectives, when child welfare workers develops a professional understanding of EA.

4.1 Profession

Molander and Terum (2008) have argued that the concept of profession consists of an organizational and performative aspect. The *organizational aspect* broadly describes a profession to be organized in certain ways to maintain its tasks, referring to control over who has access to professional work tasks and the relative autonomy a profession has in the expertise of tasks (Molander & Smeby, 2013; Molander & Terum, 2008). The *performative aspect* refers to profession as an occupation with a specialized quality in relation to how professionals act and perform their work (Molander & Smeby, 2013; Molander & Terum, 2008). This means that the work of a profession requires certain knowledge and skills acquired through practice (Hanssen, 2018).

The performative aspect of profession is of specific relevance for this thesis because it emphasizes that professions apply “somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases” (Abbott, 1988, p. 8). In this way, professionals have an explicit responsibility for serving

the community, which requires a distinctive core of knowledge suited to performing the service on a qualified level (Molander & Terum, 2008). The characteristics of the tasks of a profession must further be handled through a combination of knowledge and discretion for professionals to act adequately with the problems children and families encounter (Molander & Terum, 2008). Therefore, professionals in CWS need to apply knowledge to understand and solve service recipients' problems, such as EA (Molander & Smeby, 2013; Molander & Terum, 2008). The concept of EA, as well as the problems that child welfare workers encounter, are characterized by diversity, complexity, and constantly evolving challenges (Grimen, 2008; Kleppe, 2023; Kojan & Storhaug, 2023; Munro, 2020). These problems are difficult to standardize, they are characterized by uncertainty, and must therefore be handled with professional discretion (Grimen & Molander, 2008; Molander, 2016; Molander & Terum, 2008). In this way, professionals are part of a value system; they employ different forms of knowledge for specific cases, and they perform normative work that involves professional discretion (Abbott, 1988; Grimen & Molander, 2008; Molander, 2016; Molander & Terum, 2013).

4.1.1 Professional discretion

As noted above, professional discretion is a fundamental component of a profession (Grimen & Molander, 2008; Molander & Terum, 2008; Molander, 2016). In articles 2 and 3, discretion is described to be characterized by the application of abstract knowledge and principles, to connect and classify a concrete situation to a professional understanding of the problem, such as EA (Abbott, 1988; Grimen & Molander, 2008). Thus, discretion involves connecting abstract knowledge and overarching child welfare rights and principles to the structural and contextual factors of each child and family to appreciate their individuality (Abbott, 1988; Caspersen & Paulsen, 2019; Grimen & Molander, 2008). To address the complexity of child welfare work and to facilitate measures adjusted to the individual child and family, professional discretion is argued

to be both desirable and necessary (Casperson & Paulsen, 2019; Grimen & Molander, 2008; Molander, 2016).

According to Grimen and Molander (2008), professional discretion consists of a structural and an epistemic dimension. The *structural dimension* refers to a discretionary space where professionals have been delegated the power to act with some freedom but in accordance with the rules and standards set by authorities and management (Grimen & Molander, 2008). In this dimension, child welfare workers can choose between permitted alternatives of action based on their judgments. These choices and judgments are structured and regulated by legislation and political guidelines such as the zero-tolerance ideal of abuse and violence, and by overarching rights, norms and values in CWS, as outlined in chapter 2. This also involves definitions and descriptions of EA as well as, for example, which measures are available for child welfare workers to choose from (Grimen & Molander, 2008).

The *epistemic dimension* of professional discretion is referred to as discretionary reasoning and involves child welfare workers' cognitive activities and reasoning processes with the aim of making holistic judgments and decisions on how to understand a problem or how to act in a situation (Grimen & Molander, 2008). In these activities and processes, child welfare workers select, combine, and compare different forms of knowledge, with information about the specific child and family, to come to an understanding of the problem and how to solve it. To do this, child welfare workers base their understanding, decisions, and judgments on the best combination of knowledge that they hold or have access to (Grimen, 2008; Grimen & Molander, 2008). As such, child welfare workers choose and decide what kind of knowledge of EA is available for them to base their descriptions, considerations, and understandings on. They further combine and compare the chosen knowledge with the content in the structural dimension of discretion. As such, there is a connection between the two dimensions of discretion when child welfare workers negotiate their descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA with the leeway they have within laws and

regulations (Grimen & Molander, 2008; Caspersen & Paulsen, 2019). These connections affect their actions⁶ and, thus, how they perform their work (Grimen & Molander, 2008).

How professionals perform their work, apply knowledge, and exercise professional discretion is based on trust (Grimen & Molander, 2008; Molander, 2016). However, inadequate application of knowledge can contribute to a mistrust of the profession of child welfare work (Grimen & Molander, 2008; Kojan & Storhaug, 2023; Molander, 2016). Thus, it is argued that it is crucial that the knowledge applied and decisions and actions made are justified to make the process transparent and to make it possible for others to counter the assessments made by the CWS (Bjørnebekk & Mevik, 2023; Caspersen & Paulsen, 2019; Kleppe, 2023; Kojan & Storhaug, 2023; Molander, 2013, 2016). As such, child welfare workers must be aware of and be able to justify what knowledge their actions, decisions, and justifications are based on (Bjørnebekk & Mevik, 2023; Grimen & Molander, 2008; Kojan & Storhaug, 2023; Molander, 2013).

4.1.2 Forms of knowledge and perspectives on child abuse and violence

Like professional discretion, knowledge plays an important role in a profession to understand, and solve service recipients' problems (Molander & Smeby, 2013, p. 11). (Abbott, 1988; Grimen, 2008; Grimen & Molander, 2008). Thus, knowledge is important in professional discretion because child welfare workers must select, combine, and compare knowledge from the two dimensions of discretion to come to an understanding of concepts such as EA and problems they encounter in their work. The two dimensions of professional discretion further entail different forms of knowledge on which child welfare workers base their descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA (Bjørnebekk & Mevik, 2023; Kleppe, 2023; Levin, 2021; Oterholm, 2023).

⁶ In this thesis, action is understood in a broad sense and includes thoughts, considerations, assessments, justifications, conversations, supervision, choices, and decisions of measures, and writing of documents (Bjørnebekk & Mevik, 2023; Kojan & Storhaug, 2023; Levin, 2021).

Several efforts have been made to delineate between different forms of knowledge, such as the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, including tacit knowledge (Grimen, 2008; Polanyi, 1983), knowledge from experience and science (Berger & Luckmann (2000), vertical and horizontal structures of knowledge (Bernstein, 1999), and how knowledge is organized into conceptual and contextual coherence (Muller, 2009). These distinctions represent a dichotomy between the different forms of knowledge, illustrating that the complexity of child welfare work requires specific knowledge from a comprehensive and heterogeneous field of knowledge to work with vulnerable children and families (Bunkholdt & Kvaran, 2021; Grimen, 2008; Heggen & Dahl, 2017; Munro, 2020). Therefore, different sources of knowledge are necessary to understand problems and make comprehensive assessments to accommodate the expectations of knowledge-based work, as noted in chapter 2.2. Child welfare workers, thus, depend on a knowledge base of different theories, approaches, and experiences that they select, combine, and compare into a professional understanding of a problem to support specific children and families (Grimen, 2008). In this way, there is no clear distinction between the forms of knowledge and they are rather seen as a continuum rather than opposites (Grimen, 2008). Hence, different forms of knowledge are complementary and interwoven into a synthesis that can best contribute to a meaningful whole, to best understand the given situation, and to consider the best options for actions in a given situation (Grimen, 2008; Grimen & Molander, 2008). This relates to the processes inherent in professional discretion.

Although different forms of knowledge complement each other when professionals perform their work, I apply the concepts of conceptual and contextual coherence as proposed by Muller (2009). I do this to illuminate the stated aim of the thesis, and, thus, to explore how knowledge is constructed and organized into child welfare workers' descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA. Additionally, I apply theoretical perspectives on child abuse and violence because they may affect how knowledge about EA is organized and constructed into descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA.

Conceptual and contextual coherence

Moreover, the concepts of conceptual and contextual coherence described by Muller (2009) distinguish between two forms of coherence regarding how professionals organize and construct knowledge. Overall, the concepts reflect the dichotomy between abstract knowledge derived from specific disciplines (conceptual coherence) and knowledge based on experience in a specific profession (contextual coherence) (Muller, 2009). I find these concepts analytically appropriate for recognizing how child welfare workers organize and construct their knowledge into descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA.

The first concept, *conceptual coherence*, refers to the organization of knowledge with high codification, which presumes a hierarchy of abstraction and conceptual difficulty (Muller, 2009). The organization of knowledge construction within conceptual coherence is bound to specific bases and hierarchical structures of abstract concepts and theories. These are derived from specific disciplines and provide clear illustrative and evaluative signposts of knowledge (Muller, 2009). As such, the adequacy of knowledge construction within conceptual coherence is regulated by the adequacy of truth and logic, which can be conveyed by language, codification, and sharing (Muller, 2009, p. 216). This kind of coherence relates to how research, literature, legislation, and policy as well as the overarching values and rights of CWS, organize and construct abstract concepts, theories, and scientific knowledge of the definitions, descriptions, and conceptual frameworks of EA. Thus, conceptual coherence relates to the *structural dimension of professional discretion*.

How knowledge about EA is organized or constructed in conceptual coherence depends on its historical, social, and cultural contexts, as outlined in chapter 1.1, as well as on what is considered professionally sound in CWS, as noted in chapter 2.3. It also relates to how the terminology, definitions, and operationalization of EA vary in research, policy, and legislation, as outlined in chapter 2.1, and to the lack of research on EA, as noted in chapter 3. The knowledge construction of EA additionally relates to

which theoretical perspective is taken on EA, which will be accounted for later in this chapter. Because both child welfare work and the concept of EA are complex, knowledge construction and organization in conceptual coherence builds on knowledge from a heterogeneous field (Grimen, 2008; Kleppe, 2023; Kojan & Storhaug, 2023; Munro, 2020). At the same time, there are contradictions across disciplines and contexts about, for example, what good parenting practices are and, thus, what EA is (Læret & Skivenes, 2023). As such, challenges in organizing and constructing knowledge into a conceptual coherence of EA relate to the fact that the contributions from the scientific knowledge and abstract concepts of EA are ambiguous and lacking (Kojan & Christiansen, 2023). This may lead to that norms and values within a profession have greater influence on decisions than abstract, scientific knowledge (Kojan & Christiansen, 2023; Læret & Skivenes, 2023).

The second concept, *contextual coherence*, refers to how knowledge is organized and constructed to connect segments of knowledge that are directly oriented to the realities of varying aspects of practice, such as in child welfare work (Muller, 2009). Thus, knowledge is organized and constructed from within the profession and framed by the context of the profession (Muller, 2009). As such, contextual adequacy regulates this kind of coherence, and adequacy is internally assured in the profession (Muller, 2009, p. 2016). Knowledge construction and organization within contextual coherence are formed through the integration of language and meaning. It can, however, be challenging to articulate this coherence because it is considered subjective and embodied (Muller, 2009). Thus, contextual coherence can be related to that professionals know how to carry out their work, which refers to the performative aspect of profession (Molander & Smeby, 2013; Molander & Terum, 2008), but also to the challenges of expressing how and why they perform their work in certain ways. This may relate to how child welfare workers select the best combination of knowledge to which they have access for a professional understanding of EA. Thus, the notion of contextual coherence relates to the *epistemic dimension of discretion*.

Previous research on the use of knowledge in Norwegian CWS has demonstrated that child welfare work is based on internal experience-based knowledge which relate to knowledge inherent in contextual coherence, rather than knowledge that is based on theory and research which relates to conceptual coherence (Heggen & Dahl, 2017; Iversen & Heggen, 2015). It is suggested that this may relate to challenges in connecting theoretical abstract concepts to practical child welfare work (Heggen and Dahl (2017). This aligns with how knowledge is organized from within the context of a profession, which is also found in previous research on EA pointing out that child welfare and social workers find EA diffuse, difficult to put into words, challenging to define, identify and recognize (Baker et al., 2021; Bredal et al., 2023; Glaser et al., 2001; Iwaniec et al., 2007). The challenges in connecting theoretical knowledge to child welfare work further may relate to how child welfare workers meet uncertainties in what comprises EA in specific cases, how to understand the boundaries about what is acceptable regarding parenting and EA, how it poses harm to children, and how to deal with the law in cases of EA (chapter 3; Bredal et al., 2023; Glaser, 2002, 2011; Iwaniec et al., 2006; North, 2017, 2019; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). As such, child welfare workers may use abstract concepts and scientific knowledge as justifications without applying them to the individual or contextual aspects of the situation of a specific child (Kleppe, 2023), or being able to articulate these justifications.

Perspectives on child abuse and violence

As noted earlier, different perspectives on child abuse and violence affect what concepts and knowledge child welfare workers use when describing, considering, and understanding EA. Thus, these perspectives contribute different knowledge to the structural and epistemic dimensions of professional discretion, which affects how child welfare workers organize and construct knowledge to come to a professional understanding of EA.

A *research perspective* on child abuse and violence is useful when analyzing, identifying, and describing different forms of abuse and violence in society, both globally and

locally (Lillevik, 2019). Concerning EA, this perspective is useful when operationalizing this form of abuse and violence for research to clarify what is studied (Lillevik, 2016, 2019). The operationalizations of EA are often based on abstract concepts and theories, narrowed in terms of describing parental acts comprising EA. These operationalizations are different from legislative definitions and descriptions because they may or may not be within the scope of criminal law (Lillevik, 2016, 2019). This is for example visible in the study by Hafstad & Augusti (2019) presented in chapter 3 in this thesis. In that study, EA is described as repeatedly humiliated, ridiculed, belittled and threatened. These acts are not specified in the legislative definition of abuse and violence. However systematic and repeated verbal violations can be included in §282 in the Penal Code (2005), as illustrated in chapter 2. Lillevik (2016, 2019) also emphasized the need to research abuse and violence as cultural phenomena to better understand how cultural factors contribute to maintaining abuse. This provides valuable knowledge when considering how different forms of abuse and violence, such as EA, are understood across cultures.

The *rights perspective* on child abuse and violence consists of several aspects. First, a juridical aspect (Lillevik, 2016) or a criminal law aspect (Bredal et al., 2023), which relates to the necessity to delineate between what is legal and what is not. The focus of this perspective, refers to whether the acts committed are punishable rather than focusing on the protection of the child and the level of support needed (Aakvaag et al., 2016; Bredal et al., 2023; Lillevik, 2016). Second, the rights perspectives include a child welfare law aspect that is connected to the Child Welfare Act (2021, §6-7) and how CWS can set aside the duty of confidentiality and share information with other administrative organs when necessary. This aspect is less concerned with ensuring criminal justice, instead it focuses on considerations of the child welfare case and the best interest of the child (Bredal et al., 2023). Finally, from a human rights perspective, child abuse and violence, including EA, are considered violations of a child's human rights irrespective of criminal culpability or its consequences (Aakvaag et al., 2016; United Nations, 1989).

The *therapeutic perspective* on child abuse and violence relates to what Aakvaag et al. (2016) describe as the children's perspective on abuse and violence. This involves therapeutic work with children with experiences of abuse and violence (Lillevik, 2016, 2019), focusing on addressing and recognizing the breadth of children's experiences of abuse and violence, which may go beyond purely criminal aspects (Aakvaag et al., 2016; Lillevik, 2016, 2019). The therapeutic perspective is of specific relevance for the current thesis because the definitions and operationalizations are not always explicitly included in the legislation, but the knowledge of the detrimental effects of EA are extended, as noted in chapter 1.1, 2.1 and 3.2. From this perspective, the importance of communicating with children about their experiences with abuse and violence is emphasized, because it has shown to have great therapeutic benefits (Aakvaag et al., 2016; Lillevik, 2016). Despite this, many professionals find it challenging to talk to children about such experiences (Aakvaag et al., 2016). The terms children use to describe and talk about abuse and violence also challenge professionals because they may not recognize the terms children use to describe their situation as abuse and violence (Aakvaag et al., 2016). Aakvaag et al. (2016), thus, argued that a good understanding of the terminology used about child abuse and violence, and knowledge about different forms of abuse are crucial to fully understand what to listen and ask for to recognize this perspective.

Although the child's perspective and experiences are strong from the therapeutic perspective, Heltne and Steinsvåg (2011) argue for the need to combine the child's and the parents' perspective. This relates to the fact that it is necessary to have a clear understanding of parents' situation and how it affects their ability to provide sufficient care for their children. Knowledge and understanding about parents' perspectives increase professionals' opportunities to help families, their efforts to investigate and document abuse and violence, and to create awareness of the different forms of abuse and violence (Heltne & Steinsvåg, 2011). It is, however, crucial that children's needs are not trivialized in the efforts to understand parents (Heltne & Steinsvåg, 2011).

A *health perspective* on child abuse and violence involves an understanding of child abuse based on the health consequences it may entail (Aakvaag et al., 2016). As outlined in the introduction and in chapter 3, child abuse and EA have severe consequences for the physical and psychological health of children and youth. This is well acknowledged in the context of the Norwegian CWS, as noted in chapter 2.1. The health perspective also entails a public health perspective that understands abuse and violence as comprehensive problems that must be prevented at different levels in society (Dale et al., 2023).

An *ecological perspective* on child abuse and violence involves considering the risk of child abuse at various levels, meaning that factors which increase the risk of child abuse include both serious illness in the child, a lack of knowledge about child rearing in families, socially isolated families, limited access to health and welfare services, and poverty (Aakvaag et al., 2016). The ecological perspective on child abuse and violence defines child abuse by children's experiences, and it is viewed as crucial that children have access to stable and nurturing relationships within extended families and community social networks, as well as quality services and interventions (Aakvaag et al., 2016; Dubowitz et al., 1993). As such, the individual, relationship, and social community levels must be acknowledged and addressed in efforts to address, prevent, and understand all forms of child abuse and violence, including EA (Macy et al., 2021).

The *children's perspective* is a particular part of the therapeutic perspective on child abuse and violence. I also argue that it is inherent in the other perspectives related to what focus is taken in the different perspectives. Thus, the children's perspective differ, for example, from a rights perspective when focusing on risk and children's right to a life free from all forms of abuse and criminal law, to a therapeutic perspective when the focus is recognizing and acknowledging children's experiences to assess the level of support to reduce the impact of their experiences, and to an ecologic perspective which highlights the need to focus on both the individual, relationship and community level when understanding abuse and violence, such as EA. As such, child welfare

workers must balance different perspectives to accommodate the specific mandate CWS has to prevent and protect children from all forms of child abuse and violence.

Although the theoretical perspectives on child abuse and violence are presented separately above, they interact with each other, and knowledge from different perspectives must be integrated when making sense of and working with different forms of child abuse (Heltne & Steinsvåg, 2011; Lillevik, 2019). To increase the success of preventing, detecting, and treating child abuse and violence, however, professionals need to clarify the perspectives they take when describing and understanding child abuse (Aakvaag et al., 2016; Killén, 2021). This is, however, noted to be challenging because it is related to the multidisciplinarity characterizing the field of child abuse and violence (Aadnanes, 2020; Aakvaag et al., 2016). This entails that different professions emphasize the perspectives on child abuse and violence differently according to the purpose of the profession they are a part of (Aadnanes, 2020; Aakvaag et al., 2016). As such, the perspectives described above contribute different knowledge within the structural and epistemic dimensions of discretion, thus affecting how child welfare workers describe, consider and understand EA.

In the organization and construction of knowledge of EA and in the different perspectives taken on child abuse and violence, a great deal of power lies in how a child's situation is understood and treated and, thus, how EA is described, considered, and understood (Caspersen & Paulsen, 2019; Haugland, 2008). This is in accordance with the power of definition and interpretation that child welfare workers hold because of their expert knowledge. How knowledge is constructed and organized relates to what knowledge is considered valid, meaningful, and "true" in the profession, which also relates to what is considered professional sound in CWS as noted in chapter 2.3. These truths may become collective frameworks of understanding within a context and profession, and can affect how CWS organizes and constructs knowledge and which justifications child welfare workers use, how children's situations and problems are interpreted and defined, and what concepts are included or omitted in the

different tasks of child welfare work (Bjørnebekk & Mevik, 2023; Haugland, 2008; Hennum, 2023; Madsen, 2016; Pedersen, 2023). To enhance knowledge construction and professional discretion in child welfare work, critical reflection is considered crucial for enabling child welfare workers to question established practices and their use of concepts and knowledge (Caspersen & Paulsen, 2019; Kojan & Storhaug, 2023; Nordstoga, 2019).

4.2 Summary of the theoretical framework

In this chapter, I have introduced various concept, theories, and perspectives that make it possible to analytically explore how EA is understood in child welfare work in a more extended way than what is done in the articles. Throughout the chapter, I have aimed to illuminate how the concepts, theories, and perspectives complements and relates to each other. I have illuminated this in Figure 1, which illustrate how the theory of profession is considered an overarching theoretical framework because it entails professional discretion and the use of knowledge to develop a professional understanding of EA. Child welfare workers, thus, exercise professional discretion when they select, combine, and compare knowledge into a professional understanding of EA, which in this study entails descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA. Child welfare workers further base these descriptions, considerations, and understandings on knowledge that is organized and constructed within a conceptual coherence that relates to the structural dimension of discretion, or within contextual coherence that relates to the epistemic dimension of discretion. Different theoretical perspectives on child abuse and violence affect which concepts and knowledge from the structural and epistemic dimensions of professional discretion child welfare workers use when developing a professional understanding of EA. The arrows in the model indicate that the outlined concepts and perspectives mutually affect each other because the knowledge within them is constantly developing and changing.

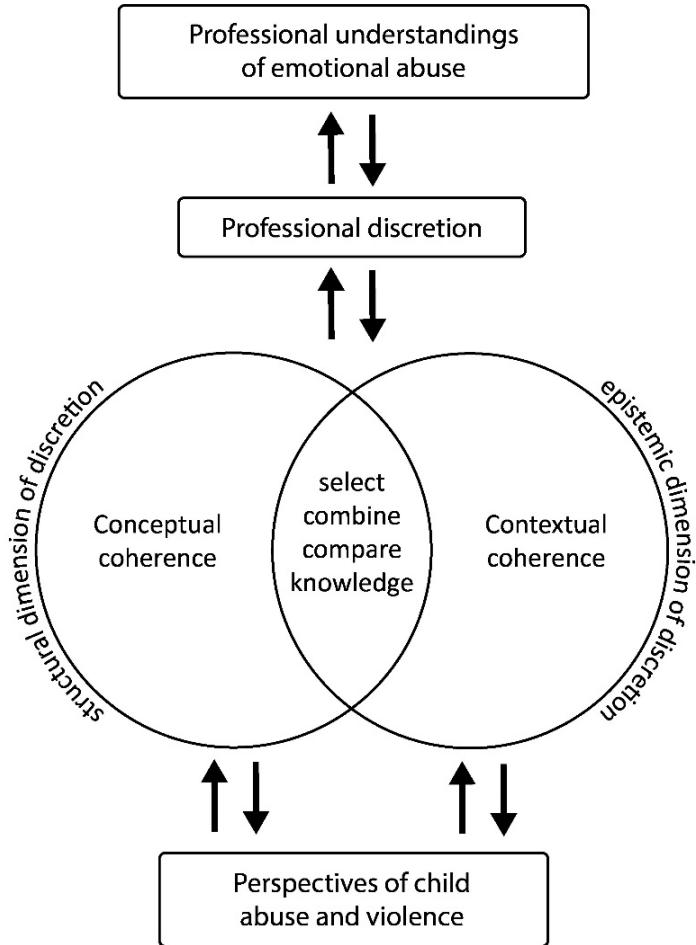


Figure 1: Illustration of how professional understandings of EA relies on the relationships between professional discretion, knowledge organized in a contextual or conceptual coherence, and knowledge inherent in perspectives on child abuse and violence.

The relevance between the concepts, theories, and perspectives accounted for in this chapter, will be further enhanced when discussing the findings of this thesis in chapter 7.1 and 7.2., as well as in the recommendations, implications, and contributions of the thesis in chapter 7.4-7.6.

5 Methodology and methods

In this chapter, I aim to clarify and position my research, and argue for its overall design and research process. The purpose is to discuss the methodological approach and the philosophical considerations of the research, as well as the process of gathering and analysing data. I also discuss the quality of the research by considering credibility, validity, reliability and reflexivity, as well as ethical considerations. By accounting for, and discussing the abovementioned elements, I aim to provide the necessary transparency that will allow the reader to judge the trustworthiness of the findings presented in chapter 6, and discussed in chapter 7.

5.1 Methodological approach and philosophical considerations

To illuminate the aim of this thesis, all three articles endeavored to obtain a rich and nuanced description of how EA is understood in child welfare work, as well as being sensitive to the context it is studied within (articles 1–3; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). I have also generated an interpretation to expand insights into the subject under study (articles 1–3; Lincoln et al., 2018). To do this, I have relied on written and spoken words, while I have directed my attention at how EA is defined and described in research (article 1) and how child welfare workers describe, understand, and consider EA (articles 2 and 3). This thesis is positioned within the *qualitative research tradition*, which explores how individuals understand the world and how they experience and construct the reality surrounding them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research, thus, emphasizes the complexity and multifaceted nature of the subject under study while aiming for an in-depth understanding from the subject's point of view (articles 1–3; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018). To do this, I have endeavored to consider and capture the sensitivity, complexity, and situatedness of understandings of EA in the context of child welfare work (articles 1–3; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This is done by focusing on the characteristics and qualities of the understandings of EA while providing a rich and nuanced description to expand on and nuance the insights into

how EA is understood (articles 1–3, chapter 1.4; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), while accounting for the contextual framework of the thesis (chapter 2) and gathering multiple forms of data (articles 1–3; chapters 6 and 7).

All qualitative research is interpretive and guided by a paradigm⁷, which can be understood as a “set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). The present thesis is positioned within what Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p. 19) referred to as a *constructivist-interpretivist paradigm*, which is based on a *relativist ontology*, *subjective epistemology*, and *naturalistic set of methodological procedures* and methods that take place in a natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 19). According to the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, my point of departure is, thus, a relativist ontology. This entails that reality, knowledge, and understanding are multiple, complex, situated, and constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018). Therefore, understandings of EA are complex and constructed by specific social, historical, and cultural contexts as well as individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018). As such, I view understandings of EA as developing realities, which are constructed by me and the respective authors of the literature reviewed (article 1), the child welfare workers participating in the focus group interviews (article 2), and the content of the child welfare documentation included in the research (article 3). By adopting a relativist ontology, I have looked for complexity, variations, and diversities in how EA is understood in child welfare work rather than attempting to narrow meanings into a few categories, ideas, or definitive conclusions of EA (articles 1–3; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kristiansen, 2020; Lincoln et al., 2018).

The current thesis further builds on a subjective epistemology whereby knowledge and understanding are viewed as relative, situated, and co-constructed in interactions among individuals, materials, and me as a researcher (articles 1–3; Creswell & Poth,

⁷ Paradigms are composed of how the nature of reality and existence is understood (ontology), how knowledge production is understood (epistemology), and the methodological premises applied to conduct research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Guba, 1990; Lincoln et al., 2018)

2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Prior, 2021). Knowledge is seen as a dynamic concept and an interpretation, perspective, or particular version of reality that is cocreated. Thus, I am considered integral to the research process because I engage in a process to construct and develop knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Lincoln et al., 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Nilsen, 2012). As such, knowledge is not neutral, which requires me to be attentive to how my relationships with the participants and material may have influenced the research process. The knowledge developed in this thesis is, thus, affected by the data, contextual and theoretical framework, status of knowledge, and previous research, as well as by me as a researcher, my meetings with other professionals, researchers, coauthor and supervisors (articles 2–3; chapter 5.5; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Prior, 2021).

Central principles from the hermeneutic approach underpinning this thesis

In this thesis, I explore the connections between international research (article 1), child welfare workers' perspectives (article 2), and child welfare documents (article 3). To illuminate these connections my work is inspired by the hermeneutic approach, which is specifically concerned with interpretation, understanding, and meaning (Gilje, 2020; Nilsen, 2012). According to Kristiansen (2020), hermeneutics "seek to interpret – and in doing so – understand how people experience and attribute meaning to things, events and social phenomena" (p. 136). As such, hermeneutics view social realities as relational and subjective and something constructed throughout a research process (Gilje, 2020; Kristiansen, 2020; Nilsen, 2012). Hermeneutics further approaches reality as consisting of various social, cultural, and historical worlds, aiming to understand the meaning of phenomena in their context (Kristiansen, 2020). This aligns with my positioning within the qualitative research tradition and the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm.

Overall, understanding and interpretation are characterized by expanding meaning through *hermeneutic circles or spirals* (Gadamer, 2000; Nilsen, 2012). This means that understanding and interpretation are only possible through the relationships and

interactions between the various parts and the whole, and vice versa (Gadamer, 2000; Gilje, 2020; Hope & LeCoure, 2010; Kristiansen, 2020; Nilsen, 2012). In this way, I have been in constant movement between the data material as an entirety and the varying parts constituting the three articles that represent distinct parts of the data. In the process of analysis, I have constantly checked and compared the emerging themes with the original documents and transcripts and vice versa. In the discussion and implications in chapter 7, I also aimed to demonstrate how the parts were influenced by their surroundings, context, and theoretical frameworks, thus shifting the focus between the part and whole, word and sentence, sentence and text, text and context, arriving at a comprehensive understanding of how EA is defined, described, considered, and understood in child welfare work (Berg-Sørensen, 2012; Kristiansen, 2020).

The hermeneutic spiral is also visible through *double* and *multiple hermeneutics*. *Double hermeneutics* refers to how researchers relate to social phenomena already interpreted by social actors (Giddens, 1976; Gilje, 2020; Nilsen, 2012). This relates to how I understand and interpret the characteristics and qualities of child welfare researchers and child welfare workers' definitions, descriptions, and considerations of EA (articles 1–3). These definitions, descriptions, and considerations are considered "first order" interpretations and include child welfare researchers' and workers' knowledge and expressions through their own empirical concepts, subjective experiences, and evaluations (Geertz, 1983; Giddens, 1989; Gilje, 2006, 2020). In my meetings with the child welfare workers (article 2), and my readings of the research literature (article 1), and child welfare documentation (article 3), my own "first order" interpretation was informed. These meetings became the starting point for my "second order" interpretation conveyed by academic language, where the participants and materials interacted with my own interpretation and meaning making of their understandings (Geertz, 1983; Gilje, 2020; Nilsen, 2012). Gilje (2020) argued that this is the basis for double hermeneutics, where the interaction between me as a researcher, the participants, and material establishes a hermeneutic spiral of

communicative relationships. However, Gilje (2020) argued that double hermeneutics are more complex than the process described above because these communicative relationships are constantly extended on multiple levels both for me as a researcher, for child welfare researchers (article 1), and for the child welfare workers participating in focus groups and writing child welfare documents (articles 2–3). Through these extensions, both the participants and I have tried to understand our own perceptions and actions while we interact with other actors, which challenges and expands our interpretations (Gilje, 2020). To embrace this complexity of the interpretation and meaning-making processes, Gilje (2020) described this as *multiple hermeneutics*.

The extensions of the hermeneutic spiral of communicative relationships, entail for child welfare workers for example, their conversations, relations, and discussions with colleagues, other professionals, children, parents, and their interactions with their knowledge base. In the focus group interviews, these processes of meaning-making and interpretation were visible as the participants' reflections and discussions informed their initial descriptions and understandings of EA, leading them to revise and negotiate their views on how to describe, consider, and understand EA, when discussing their views and experiences with other child welfare workers (article 2). Similarly, child welfare researchers have discussed and negotiated their perceptions and understandings of EA in several ways. For me, this has been evident in how I have related to both society and the individual in the processes of understanding and interpreting definitions, descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA. I have engaged with the concept of EA in the national and international literature on the topic as well as the individual subjective and various descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA expressed both in spoken words in focus group interviews, in written words in child welfare documentation, and in child welfare research. I have further tried to understand the connection between the definitions, descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA while considering their context. To do this, I have discussed the current knowledge of EA with fellow researchers and actively engaged with overlapping and nearby concepts with the aim of being aware of the

situatedness and complexity of these concepts in relation to EA. I have familiarized myself with the complexity of child welfare work with abuse and violence, aiming to understand how this might have implications for how EA is understood in the context. I have further interacted with child welfare workers, other professionals, researchers, and supervisors, and in peer-review processes of the three articles. As I have gained more insights into and understanding of the complexity of child welfare work, I have also modified the theoretical framework. Hence, these extensions of communication, interpretation, and understanding have been challenged and expanded throughout the research process and in authoring this thesis. As such, I have reached a higher level of interpretation and understanding of the subject under study in my efforts to illuminate the stated aim of the thesis in a sensitive, open, and reflective way (Gilje, 2020; Nilsen, 2012).

The hermeneutic spirals that characterize my work have also been influenced by my *preunderstandings* and *prejudices* (Gadamer, 1994; Gilje, 2020; Nilsen, 2012). Preunderstandings are outlined by Gadamer (1994) as a prerequisite for understanding and interpreting because they are the lenses through which people view the world. In this way, preunderstandings are based on my already existing relationship with the subject under study, and preunderstandings must be expanded and reflected upon to construct new knowledge (Kristiansen, 2020). Preunderstandings include theoretical frameworks, values, beliefs, ideas, experiences, culture and how we see the world through the concepts available for us (Gadamer, 1994; Gilje, 2020; Nilsen, 2012). Preunderstandings also entails that I encounter research as a participant in social life, such as being a woman, a mother, a friend, a professional, or a novice researcher. In this way my background, feelings, interests, preunderstandings, prejudices, opinions, assumptions, and personal and professional experiences affect the research process. As such, preunderstandings include the knowledge, insight, and understanding that guide the research process and are an important basis for reaching new insights and knowledge. Thus, I am considered a key instrument in research (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Finlay, 2012; Nilsen, 2012).

Although preunderstandings are a foundation for understanding and interpreting, they can also be an obstacle in the process because they may support interpretations that are characterized by prejudiced opinions about the phenomenon and the context (Gadamer & Holm-Hansen, 2012). As such, preunderstandings can restrict my ability to understand and expose me and my research to misunderstandings or understatements. Hence, I may have made mistakes, lost opportunities, and intervened with and let biases disturb the research process (Nilsen, 2012). Because my background, education, and experience influence how I perceive and interpret the world, they direct my thinking and opinions. It is, thus, necessary to acknowledge my preunderstandings and prejudices, to capture the complexities and nuances of how EA is understood in child welfare work (Kristiansen, 2020; Nilsen, 2012). Openness, sensitivity, flexibility, and reflexivity are required to reach a higher level of understanding (Berg-Sørensen, 2012; Fehér, 2016; Nilsen, 2012). Critically reflecting on my own role in the research process is also necessary to bring important knowledge to the research (chapter 5.5; Nilsen, 2012).

According to Gadamer (1975), our preunderstandings and prejudices make up a whole, which he calls horizons. When horizons meet, they change and advance, and as I try to understand the subject under study from a different horizon, I move between interpretation, understanding, and prejudice while I encounter new factors in the interplay between me and what I am trying to understand. There is, however, no absolute, objective truth to be reached through interpretation or understanding (Gadamer, 1975; Gilje, 2020; Lincoln et al., 2018; Nilsen, 2012). Rather, it is space for several interpretations and understandings. The process of interpretation and understanding, thus, expands until an understanding has been reached through the fusion of horizons concerning preunderstandings, paradigms, and sources of information (Gadamer, 1975; Gilje, 2020; Kristiansen, 2020; Nilsen, 2012). In this way, my research is considered a co-construction and interpretation of the various versions of reality, which is in line with the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm underpinning this thesis. I have further engaged in multiple communicative relationships, and I have

tried to listen carefully to child welfare workers' descriptions, considerations and understanding of EA. I have also deliberately read the definitions, descriptions, and considerations of EA in research articles and child welfare documents with respect for the context within which they are written and read. Additionally, I have considered the contextual surroundings of the thesis, recognized my preunderstandings and prejudices, my interaction with the participants and materials, and considered how this potentially shaped my interpretations and the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kristiansen, 2020; Nilsen, 2012).

5.2 Principles for selection, recruitment and sample characteristics

A purposeful sampling strategy was applied to gain information relevant to the thesis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this sampling strategy, the researcher deliberately select specific individuals, events, settings, or materials based on the important information they can provide to illuminate the aim of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). The overall sample in the present thesis, consisting of research articles (article 1), child welfare workers (article 2), and child welfare documents (article 3), formed a sample that ideally would provide rich information on the subject under study. According to the three articles, several rough criteria for selection and recruitment were established. The inclusion and exclusion criteria of the literature in the scoping review are described in depth in article 1 and will not be repeated here. In the following, I account for the principles for selection, recruitment, and characteristics of the child welfare offices (articles 2 and 3), child welfare workers (article 2), and child welfare documents (article 3) participating in the study. Ethical issues related to these elements will be discussed in section 5.5.

To gain insights into the stated research questions of articles 2 and 3 and to illuminate the aim of this thesis, child welfare offices at the municipality level in Norway were recruited. A criterion for recruiting child welfare offices was to have as heterogeneous a range as possible to ensure diversity and variations in the sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Another criterion was that the offices should be in different

geographical locations in Norway, including both larger cities and more rural areas. When recruiting child welfare offices, I approached their management by e-mail and followed up with a meeting with the management at the locations of the offices or via Microsoft Teams. In the meetings, I provided information about the aims and purposes of the overall research project as well as the research process. Recruitment was performed in two phases. In the first phase, I approached seven offices, five of which agreed to participate. Three of these five offices withdrew because of reasons related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and a lack of time to prioritize participation in research studies. I resumed the recruitment process and approached seven offices in the second phase, in which four offices agreed to participate. Six child welfare offices agreed to participate. One of these were in a rural area, three in small cities, and two in larger cities. The characteristics of the child welfare offices, in terms of employees and the organization of their work, varied. The management of the child welfare offices signed an informed consent form agreeing to facilitate the recruitment of child welfare workers to the focus group study (article 2) and retrieve documents from the children's case files for the document analysis (article 3). In this way, the management of each child welfare office functioned as a gatekeeper in both empirical studies (articles 2 and 3; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Malterud, 2012).

Within the six child welfare offices, child welfare workers were recruited to participate in focus group interviews because of their formal qualifications and working experience (article 2). Further criteria for inclusion, the recruitment process, and sample characteristics are outlined in article 2. 24 child welfare workers participated in focus group interviews. In the present thesis, the participants in the focus group study are commonly called participants or child welfare workers, and they are considered as being co-constructors of the knowledge developed, as argued in chapter 1.3 and further discussed in chapter 5.1.

The child welfare documents included in article 3 were retrieved from the abovementioned six child welfare offices. The initial criterion for the documents was

that they should be based on the Child Welfare Act (1992) §4-12. In the initial meetings with the managers of the child welfare offices, I was advised to include documents based on §4-4.6 in the Child Welfare Act (1992) because they emphasized that I would risk losing significant data otherwise. Thus, I adjusted the criteria to include documents based on the Child Welfare Act (1992) §4-12 and §4-4.6. The documents should be written in the period 2017–2021 to illuminate the current situation, and the documents should be written by different child welfare workers to include as many descriptions and considerations of EA as possible.

With the abovementioned criteria, 47 studies were included in the initial sample. In the process of retrieving documents, the criteria were adjusted to include all forms of child abuse and violence to increase the possibility for the documents to include descriptions of and considerations about EA. This reduced the number of documents to 24. In the analysis, it was necessary to adjust the criteria to that documents should include the Norwegian term “psychological violence” to enable an exploration of the stated aim and research question of article 3. The final sample consisted of 12 documents from the case files of 12 children, which was appropriate for sufficiently exploring the research question in article 3 (article 3; chapter 1.2). Two documents were based on the Child Welfare Act (1992) §4-4.6, and 10 were based on §4-12. These documents were retrieved from five of the six child welfare offices. In the sixth office, none of the documents fulfilled the inclusion criteria.

5.3 Gathering data

Qualitative research within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm incorporates a variety of research methods taking place in natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018). This means that the methods of gathering data are not removed from the natural world of the participants or material being researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018). While aiming to attain in-depth and nuanced insights into how EA is understood in child welfare work, the present thesis draws on a triangulation of various sources of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln,

2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The method applied in article 1 was a scoping review which is reported in detail in the article. In article 2, I applied focus group interviews, while article 3 included a document analysis. In this section, I discuss the methods used in articles 2 and 3.

Focus group interviews

In line with the research question of article 2, focus group interviews were considered the most appropriate method because they create the space to identify common descriptions and understandings of a subject, as well as critical discussions and different opinions (Kitzinger, 1995; Malterud, 2012, 2017). Focus group interviews were also considered suitable because they can generate insights into a topic that is not given much attention in research, from a group of participants who have relevant knowledge to illuminate the research question under study (Jacobsen, 2022; Wilkinson, 2015). To obtain rich and nuanced data about the stated research question, I developed a topic guide based on previous research on EA, my meetings with the research field, and the contextual and theoretical frameworks presented in article 2 and elaborated on in chapters 2, 3, and 4 (Krueger & Kasey, 2000) (Appendix 1). The topic guide was semi structured, which structured the interview but also allowed flexibility when conducting the focus group interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The topic guide centered on the child welfare workers' descriptions, considerations and understandings of EA and their experiences working with EA, such as in investigations, in communication with parents and children and when making decisions regarding thresholds and levels of support.

I conducted six focus group interviews. Three were at child welfare offices, and three were through Microsoft Teams and Zoom because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions to traveling and meeting groups of people. Face-to-face interviews have been argued to make it easier to capture feelings and connect with participants and are not vulnerable to technical issues or other concerns related to online data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, digital interviews made it possible for

me to conduct focus group interviews, regardless of the mentioned restrictions and enabled continuity in the research process (Willemesen et al., 2022). To enhance the opportunities for participation, I collaborated with the management of the child welfare offices to decide which online platform to use to make the interviews accessible to the participants (Daniels et al., 2019). Moreover, the participants expressed that they were experienced in participating in conversations online.

I met with each focus group one time, and the size of the groups varied from three to seven participants. The participants shared their demographic characteristics and experiences in terms of working as contact persons in the same child welfare office. Despite this, they did not necessarily know each other well because of the varying size of the offices and how they were organized and located. I was familiar with two of the participants from my work background. The fact that the participants were colleagues, that I was familiar to two participants, and that three interviews were conducted digitally may have affected the conversations in terms of creating unwanted group dynamics, flow in discussions, and the participants' expressions of understandings, and diverging opinions (Malterud, 2012, 2017; Matthews et al., 2018). The quality of digital interview data is, however, comparable to that of the physical focus group interview data (Abrams et al., 2015; Flynn et al., 2018). Across the focus group interviews in the current study, there were limited variations in concentration, participation, duration, content, or depth across the interviews.

Each focus group lasted between 75 and 90 minutes, and both the physical and digital focus group interviews were audio-recorded with the help of a digital audio-recorder. I encouraged the participants in the digital interviews to have the camera on to stimulate interaction and engagement (Willemesen et al., 2022). In both the digital and physical focus group interviews, I strove for an uninterrupted and comfortable atmosphere. Each focus group interview started with an initial phase to create a safe space where I presented myself and my background, the study's purpose, and any relevant ethical issues regarding how data would be recorded, stored, and used. I did

this to assure the participants that it would be safe to share their views and experiences and that their identities would not be disclosed inappropriately (Tritter & Landstad, 2020). After the initial phase, the participants introduced themselves, and I asked questions about their educational and professional backgrounds. They were also asked to express their view of researching EA in the context of their work before the interviews went along according to the topic guide. At the end, the participants were given the opportunity to take a final position on the topics discussed for the purpose of participant validation, elaboration, or challenge (Tritter & Landstad, 2020).

During the interviews, the participants were active, and the discussions reflected the topics relevant to the current study. My role in the focus group interviews was to serve as a “moderator” or “facilitator,” which is a key feature in such interviews (Malterud, 2012; Tritter & Landstad, 2020; Wilkinson, 2015). In this way, I set the topics, shaped, and facilitated the group discussions, aiming to give space and voice to the participants. I endeavored to be attentive to the participants’ verbal and nonverbal signs for wanting to say something to give all an opportunity to comment on the statements and questions posed. In the digital interviews, we decided to use the “raise hand” function to make it easier for the participants to give a signal when trying to say something and for me to identify participants who wanted to talk. Using this function has, however, been argued to make conversations more static, disrupting the natural flow of conversations and leading to brief responses (James & Busher, 2022). To overcome this, I strove to carefully encourage the participants to say all they wanted to say before giving the space to those raising their hands. However, I experienced that, in the digital focus group interviews, I needed to be sensitive to facial expressions and available body language to identify who wanted to talk.

Moreover, I aimed to be attentive to the activity of the participants, and I regularly gave everyone a possibility to talk by asking if anyone would like to elaborate on, bring in another perspective on, or supplement what we had discussed thus far. I also adjusted the pace of posing questions and summarizing discussions, giving the

participants room and space to reflect on what had been discussed. Throughout the interview, I let the participants define the topics themselves and encouraged them to interact with each other by allowing opinions and reflections to bounce back and forth between the participants (Malterud, 2012; Tritter & Landstad, 2020; Wilkinson, 2015). In this way, I alternated between asking participants to elaborate on some topics and moving the interview forward. I further asked follow-up questions to increase depth and to obtain illustrative examples. I endeavored to do this without interrupting the participants' reflections and to maximize the scope for interaction within the focus group (Tritter & Landstad, 2020).

Document analysis

In the third article, specific documents were chosen to answer the research question (article 3; chapter 1.2). The focus of the document analysis was on the content of the documents, both when it came to what was “in” the documents and how the content came into being (Prior, 2021). As such, documents could help me uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research question (Bowen, 2009; Jacobsson, 2021; Prior, 2021; Silverman, 2013). The method used can be understood as “unobtrusive” because the included documents were written prior to the study, without the involvement of me as a researcher or my research interest (Bowen, 2009). However, the documents reflect professional and organizational standards because they are written within Child Welfare Services (CWS), and because their audiences are both the children and families they apply to and the Child Welfare Tribunal, which is responsible for decision-making for out-of-home placements in CWS (the Child Welfare Act, 1992, §4-4.6, §4-12). Thus, the documents exist in a network of other documents because they refer to other texts prior to the specific document being sent to the Child Welfare Tribunal (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004; Jacobsson, 2021; Prior, 2021). In line with the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm of the thesis, the documents are viewed as formed by the context, which has implications for how the documents are shaped, written, and read (Jacobsson, 2021; Prior, 2021).

The twelve documents included have similarities because they justify arguments for out-of-home care for the child in focus and provide both descriptions and assessments of the child's care situation, which is of particular importance because they form the basis for the exercise of professional discretion in CWS. The included documents were also different because the documents based in §4-12⁸ were more comprehensive than the documents based in §4-4.6 (Child Welfare Act, 1992). The documents are perceived as standardized because each office had a template for the documents. In two offices, the documents based in §4-12 were written by lawyers, but the descriptions and assessments of the child welfare workers were included. The included documents were, however, mainly authored by child welfare workers. This indirectly includes their descriptions and considerations of EA as part of the current study (article 3). The child welfare workers who authored the documents were not necessarily the same as the participants in the focus group interviews. As such, there is no direct connection between what was said in the focus groups (article 2) and what has been written in the documents (article 3). Such a direct connection could have facilitated more in-depth knowledge about the reasoning behind the content of the documents. However, the fact that these connections are not available can enable even more variations and diversity in the descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA. The documents included in article 3 made it possible to obtain information about descriptions and considerations of EA, which complements the data in articles 1 and 2, thus illuminating the stated aim of the thesis from a unique perspective than the previous articles (Jacobsen, 2022; Jacobsson, 2021).

5.4 Analyzing the data

The process of analyzing the data can consist of three overarching steps: preparing, organizing, and reporting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The ways in which I prepared and

⁸ The documents included in article 3 are based in §4-12 and §4-4, 6 in the Child Welfare Act (1992). These paragraphs are not considerably changed in the new Child Welfare Act (2021). §4-12 in the Child Welfare Act (1992) is §5-1 in the Child Welfare Act (2021), while §4-4,6 in the Child Welfare Act (1992) is §3-2 in the Child Welfare Act (2021).

organized the data will be accounted for in this chapter. Reporting the data refers to presenting the findings in articles 1–3 as well as in chapter 6. Despite the overarching steps, the analysis was circular in terms of a constant movement between preparing, organizing, and reporting rather than performing analysis in distinct steps. This aligns with the hermeneutic approach and the pending between the data material as an entirety and the varying parts constituting the three articles.

5.4.1 Preparing the data for analysis

Preparing the data for analysis had different meanings because the three different studies had different characteristics. In articles 1 and 3, I extracted text from previously published research articles (article 1) and child welfare documents (article 3) to prepare the data for analysis. In the process of extraction, coding schemes that operationalized the research questions were developed. These schemes provided structure and ensured that relevant data were extracted. The coding scheme of the research articles (article 1) included the author(s) of the article and different descriptions and definitions of EA. These descriptions and definitions were extracted verbatim, including all words and references used in the specific article, to perform the analysis as precisely as possible. The extracted data for article 1 are provided in detail in its appendix.

The coding scheme of child welfare documentation (article 3) included the anonymized serial number of the case and which paragraph the document was based on in the Child Welfare Act (1992). It also included information on where in the documents EA was described and considered, how it was described and considered, what terms related to EA were used, whether they were consistent, and what characterized the assessments or considerations of EA. The extraction was performed by me. In the initial analysis of these documents, equivalent information on other forms of abuse and violence was extracted because it became relevant. I carefully extracted only data that I had the necessary approval to extract, as discussed in the ethical considerations in chapter 5.6. I further read and reread the documents several times to avoid missing

relevant data during the extraction process. If I encountered uncertainties, I discussed them with my coauthor and supervisors until a mutual understanding was established.

In article 2, the data were prepared by transcribing the spoken language to written language (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). It is argued that researchers should transcribe interviews to enhance the overview of the data and obtain a more thorough understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Malterud, 2012, 2017). However, the focus group interviews were transcribed by a professional typist because of delays related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim because my focus has been on what is said and who was speaking. This thematic content was considered the most important in the transcriptions, which means that they do not include contextual elements of the focus group interview, such as how something was said or descriptions of the surroundings of the interviews.

The typist had no experience in my research field, which might have led to misinterpretations (Nilssen, 2012). Because the transcription process is arguably interpretative and part of the initial analysis, I reviewed and edited all the transcriptions while listening to the audio files before analyzing the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This allowed me to check who said what, how the content was communicated, and possible misinterpretations made during transcription. Through this work, I gained better insight and greater comprehension of the data, and reduced the risk of analytical loss during transcription. I was also able to consider the size of the focus groups, the familiarity of the participants, possible differences in physical and digital interviews, and the social context in which the participants worked.

The research comprising this thesis, includes two languages: English and Norwegian. The findings in all articles are reported in English, and in the scoping review, all included studies were published in English (article 1). For articles 2 and 3, however, I needed to prepare the data for analysis by translating transcriptions and extractions from Norwegian to English. The data were gathered, transcribed, and extracted in

Norwegian, but when reporting the findings, quotations (article 2) and extracts (article 3) were translated to English. In the translations, I aimed to achieve accuracy, and I translated the quotations and extracts from Norwegian to English and then back to Norwegian again to check the consistency of the translations. In the translations, it was not possible to convey the Norwegian dialect in written academic English, which may have led to a loss of authenticity from the focus group interviews (article 2). The documents in article 3 are written in “bokmål” or “nynorsk”, so this was not an issue in that study.

Despite considerate translations of quotations and extracts, issues may occur when translating from one language to another or when trying to find terms that correspond and refer in the same way to the same phenomena (articles 1–3; Backström-Widjeskog & Hansén, 2002). This has been somewhat problematic because the terminology related to EA varies internationally, and because the term EA is difficult to translate into Norwegian. The relationship between EA and the Norwegian term “psychological violence” and my terminological choices are deliberately accounted for in articles 2 and 3 as well as chapter 1.3. The challenges related to translations of terms are also discussed in the methodological considerations in chapter 7.3.

5.4.2 Organizing the data: ways of analyzing the data

The data were organized and analyzed by applying different analytical approaches because the three articles focused on the definitions, descriptions, considerations, and understanding of EA from different angles. How the analytical approaches have been carried out is described in the articles (articles 1–3). Here, I focus on the overarching analytical approaches chosen to illuminate the research questions of the articles and, thus, the aim of the thesis.

In article 1, I applied thematic synthesis, which is appropriate when the study aims to synthesize specific research findings (Thomas & Harden, 2008). In article 2, I used thematic analysis, which is suitable when the research aims to identify detailed, rich,

and complex descriptions and accounts for the data, and when the research questions explore professional understandings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). I further adopted a reflexive thematic analysis, which involves that I have an active engagement in the analysis and considering my own role and impact on the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021, 2022). In article 3, the analysis was inspired by a qualitative content analysis, as described by Bengtsson (2016). This analytical approach aims at relating the findings of a study to the context or environment in which they are produced (Bengtsson, 2016), which is suitable considering that article 3 is an analysis of child welfare documents. Moreover, the abovementioned analytical approaches align with the qualitative research tradition aiming to consider the sensitivity, complexity, and situatedness of the subject under study as well as the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm of the research, hence entailing a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology (articles 1–3; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The chosen analytical approaches share similarities because they are all systematic qualitative processes of analyzing textual data through coding, investigating meaning, and aiming to develop themes to present the findings (Bengtsson, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Thomas & Harden, 2008). They also consider the theoretical framework of the study to play a limited role in how themes are developed and that they are characterized by different stages or phases when conducting the analysis (articles 1–3; Bengtsson, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020, 2022; Thomas & Harden, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2013, 2016). It is, however, important to note that despite stages or phases in the analytical approaches, the analysis I conducted was not a linear process moving from one stage or phase to the next. Rather, it was interactive, recursive, and circular with multiple reviews and modifications between the different parts of the thesis (articles 1-3), and the current thesis as a whole.

Another similarity across the analytical approaches is that they allow for both descriptions and interpretations of the data. In this way, data are related to both manifest (Bengtsson, 2016; Thomas & Harden, 2008), semantic (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022), and latent levels of content and meaning (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2022; Bengtsson, 2016; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Manifest and semantic levels refer to the surface meaning of the definitions, descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA and keep the analytical focus on codes and themes close to the text (Bengtsson, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The latent levels of the definitions, descriptions, and considerations of EA refer to the implicit meaning and content with a higher level of interpretation (Bengtsson, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The process of identifying manifest or semantic and latent content, however, separates the analytical approaches when developing codes and themes (Bengtsson, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Thomas & Harden, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). In thematic synthesis and qualitative content analysis, the development of manifest and latent content is separate (Bengtsson, 2016; Thomas & Harden, 2008). In contrast, the process of identifying semantic and latent content is combined in reflexive thematic analysis because they are considered inseparable (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020 2022; Byrne, 2021).

In the chosen analytical approaches, a critical objective is to determine what a theme is (Bengtsson, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Moreover, themes are seen as particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset, which is constructed by the researcher to develop a narrative within the themes (Bengtsson, 2016; Byrne, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). These patterns are often underpinned or united by a core concept that helps the researcher determine and demonstrate a narrative within each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2021). In article 2, for example, theme 2 was organized by the concept of emotional care and related to how child welfare workers tended to reflect more on emotional care than on EA. I, thus, organized the quotations and codes from the transcriptions related to this concept, to determine the narrative and capture the

shared meaning across the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This theme, as well as the others, was repeatedly reviewed against transcripts (article 2), extracts from documents (articles 1 and 3), and discussed with supervisors, before they were named and defined.

Both the development of codes and themes in articles 1–3 aimed at arriving at a latent level of analysis that could provide a thick, nuanced, and detailed description and understanding of the characteristics and qualities of how EA is understood in child welfare work. All three chosen analytical approaches emphasize that the latent level of analysis involves the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations that shape and inform the manifest or semantic and latent content of the data (Bengtsson, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, the analysis is interpretative and requires a more creative and active role on the part of the researcher, which was necessary to reach a higher level of understanding of how EA is understood in child welfare work and how it aligns with the underlying ontological, epistemological, and methodological positioning and approach used in the thesis (chapter 5.; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2021). I also carefully considered both the meaning constructed and communicated by the research, participants, the documents, and my interpretation of this meaning (Byrne, 2021). The themes developed in the analysis are presented in chapter 6 and in articles 1–3, and in chapter 7.1 and 7.2 I discuss the findings across the different articles.

5.5 Quality of research

Quality is a comprehensive and widely discussed topic in the qualitative research literature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) and focuses on the overall trustworthiness of research and whether the knowledge constructed is valid and reliable (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Postholm & Jacobsen, 2022). The quality of the research is considered against the concepts of credibility, validity, reliability, transferability, and reflexivity. These concepts will be described and applied to reveal and account for the process of my research increase the transparency and trustworthiness of the study.

Credibility refers to how research procedures and results are evaluated, and validity, reliability, and transferability are the concepts to evaluate the credibility of research (Thagaard, 2018). *Validity* in qualitative research is about how methods and instruments are applied, and how data are used and able to represent the subject under study, as it has been conceptualized in the research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Thagaard, 2018). *Reliability* refers to being honest and fair when transparently describing the research process (Thagaard, 2018). Addressing reliability in qualitative studies involves precision, accuracy, consistency, and replicability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Thagaard, 2018).

To ensure validity and reliability, I have given detailed and thick descriptions informing the readers about all steps, phases, procedures, considerations, approaches, and choices made (articles 1–3; chapters 5.2, 5.3, 5.4; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I have provided a thick description of the concept under study to ensure conceptual validity and reliability (articles 2 and 3; chapters 1.3 and 7.4; Postholm & Jacobsen, 2018). When analyzing, reporting, and discussing the findings and their implications, I have also contextualized the concept and study within the specific context in which the understandings of EA are studied (articles 2–3; chapters 2 and 7; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). I have provided thick descriptions of the findings when using quotations (article 2) and extracts from the literature (article 1) and the documents (article 3) to be transparent about the data, interpretations, and to illuminate the depth and breadth of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). During the analysis, I checked consistency within the findings on an individual level in each article and in their entirety. In this way, the entire process is accessible for external and my own critical examination. According to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as an “audit trail,” the research process has been documented so that it can be reviewed and approved.

Critical evaluation and reviews of research are emphasized to enhance validity and reliability in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This

has been done by receiving peer reviews on the three articles, through discussions with supervisors and fellow researchers, and in the middle and final research seminars. I also visited the research institute VIVE in Copenhagen, Denmark, with the purpose of presenting and discussing my interpretations of the findings of the three articles and their implications. Working with a coauthor in article 3 also allowed for an assessment of the research process and product, thereby providing interrater validity. Moreover, these evaluations provided valuable discussions based on our diverse backgrounds, knowledge, and experience.

Triangulation of methods of gathering data is also argued to be a powerful strategy of validity and reliability. Different methods complement each other and illuminate the aim of the thesis in varying ways (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Nilsen, 2012; Patton, 2015; Postholm & Jacobsen, 2018). In sum, the scoping review (article 1), the focus group interviews (article 2), and the child welfare documents (article 3) helped complement and illuminate the aim in a nuanced way, hence providing useful insights and knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Postholm & Jacobsen, 2018).

Transferability in qualitative studies refers to how the research resonates with and is applicable to similar contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Postholm & Jacobsen, 2018; Thagaard, 2018). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the best approach for achieving transferability is thorough, detailed, and honest descriptions, which enable readers to evaluate the research. Additionally, nuances, variations, and diversity in findings are prominent issues when it comes to transferability (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). To facilitate transferability, I have provided thick descriptions of the research process and compared my research findings with previous research which may complement the picture as well as illuminate similarities or variations across studies. I have further aimed to be explicit on my ontological, epistemological, and methodological positioning to ensure that they are engaged in a consistent, coherent, and transparent way. I have also discussed the contributions and implications of thesis for research, policy, and practice. Despite these efforts, my work has a qualitative

approach and will not be fully transferable because of changes in participants, context, and situations.

Reflexivity is considered paramount in the credibility of qualitative research and refers to an explicit process of self-awareness where the researcher reflects on and analyses their influence and impact on the research (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Finlay, 2012). As such, my role as a researcher and integrity are decisive regarding the quality of the ethical considerations provided in the articles and in section 5.6 and the constructed knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Nilsen, 2012). Transparency means honestly disclosing the research process and is an essential element in the reflexivity and credibility of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nilsen, 2012; Postholm & Jacobsen, 2018). To ensure transparency, I have endeavored to make choices in the process as informed as possible, and I have strived to be transparent about the various phases of the research process and my positionality. I have critically reflected on my impact on the research and acknowledged that I am a key instrument in the research (chapter 5.1; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Nilsen, 2012).

To increase transparency and reflexivity in the research, I have written research notes that included reflections, thoughts, feelings, and decisions made that could be important to the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nilsen, 2012). I have posed questions to myself, written about my sensitivity in the research process, my ambiguity about the direction the research took, and about the contradictions related to terminology and conceptualizations of EA as well as about the internal consistency of my research in which I found hard to express in periods. In these notes, I included responses from the management of the child welfare offices when I contacted them (articles 2 and 3), as well as responses from the participants in the focus group and thoughts about the context and interactions of the focus groups, comments from the participants, and my own thoughts and feelings before and after the interviews (article 2). When retrieving documents, I took notes of how the documents looked, how they were standardized, and thoughts according to adjustments to the inclusion criteria

(article 3). In my efforts to be reflexive and transparent, I strove to have tolerance for ambiguity and frustration in the distinct phases of research and to be sensitive to cues within myself and in the research field. I have also endeavored to be aware of my communicative skills, relational abilities, and to have respect for the integrity of research participants and materials (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nilsen, 2012).

In line with my methodological approach and constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the developed knowledge is viewed as co-constructed between me, the participants, and the material but also between me and other researchers and experts in the field (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). To ensure quality, I have endeavored to be aware of how the knowledge and perspectives of other researchers and experts in the field have affected my understanding and interpretations. I have also interacted with my supervisors throughout the research process, and I have coauthored article 3 with one of my supervisors (article 3; Ness & Paulsen, in review). This makes them co-constructors of knowledge in terms of influencing the outcome of the process (Nilsen, 2012). The supervisor I authored article 3 with has extensive knowledge of both the professional and research fields of child welfare work. The other supervisor was somewhat unfamiliar with the context of child welfare work but had extensive and valuable experience with research on children and special education. These “inside” and “outside” perspectives, and the questions the supervisors posed about the subject, and the context of the research made me sensitive to issues that I may have overlooked myself. Both of my supervisors have been valuable discussion partners, they have commented on drafts in the writing process, and they have participated actively in the formulations of the different texts. I have endeavored to be open to the guidance and contributions of the supervisors, while also being concerned with how this influenced me as a novice researcher in the context of child welfare work. I have actively written notes before and after supervision to increase reflexivity in these processes.

5.6 Ethical considerations

Research is highly ethical (NESH, 2022), and ethical considerations relate to how the researcher carries out research, both in actions possible to articulate and in unspoken actions (Brinkmann, 2007; Creswell, 2013). Ethical issues are briefly discussed in articles 2 and 3 as well as in sections 5.2 and 5.3 . In this section, I provide a more nuanced discussion on these issues and how they are embedded in all stages of the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kvæle & Brinkmann, 2015).

When considering ethical issues, anonymity, confidentiality, and possible consequences for participants should be addressed (Kvæle & Brinkmann, 2015; Thagaard, 2018). To address these issues, the Ph.D. project received formal approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data⁹ (NSD, SIKT) (NSD #210395) (Appendix 2). To gain access to the documents, additional approval was granted by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) (Appendix 3). Anonymity, confidentiality, and possible consequences for the participants were considered for the child welfare offices (articles 2 and 3), child welfare workers (article 2), and child welfare documents (article 3). For the child welfare offices, this was ensured by using a number for each office. They also signed an informed consent form to participate and facilitate the research (Appendix 4). For anonymity and confidentiality and to limit potential negative consequences for both the child welfare workers participating in the focus group study (article 2) and the children who are a third party of the document study (article 3), I have not reported which child welfare offices participated in the overall project.

Anonymity, confidentiality, and possible consequences for the participants in the focus group study were handled in different ways (article 2). First, the participants had a serial number corresponding to the number of child welfare offices in which they were employed. They also received and signed a letter of consent (Appendix 5), which

⁹ The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) changed its name to Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, which, in Norwegian, is abbreviated to SIKT.

provided information about the general purpose of the study as well as assurance of their anonymity, confidentiality, and possibility of dropping out of the study without any explanation. I did not gather any directly sensitive personal information about the participants, all names were anonymized in the transcribed material, and when reporting on the focus group study, the participants were referred to as participants or child welfare workers. To optimize the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, ground rules were set in the initial phase of the focus groups, which involved ensuring that personal details and potentially sensitive material were not discussed outside of the group (Tritter & Landstad, 2020; Wilkinson, 2015). We discussed the importance of not disclosing information that could risk anonymity and confidentiality of the third party, which involved vulnerable children and families in need of support from CWS. My confidentiality was clarified at the start and the end of the focus group interviews.

The focus group interviews were audio-recorded, and only I had access to the audio files. They were, however, transcribed by a professional typist, and an agreement was signed between the typist and Nord University (Appendix 6). The files were available for the typist through an encrypted storage device that was delivered and gathered by me. The files were never stored on the typist's computer. The typist transcribed the participants' original first names as they often figured in the discussions, and did not receive information about the participants' surnames or about which child welfare offices they worked in if this was not discussed specifically by the participants. When I received the transcripts, I made names fictitious, and it has been vital for me to make the data anonymous so that neither the participants nor the child welfare offices could be recognized when reporting the findings. All the recordings on my computer are encrypted and anonymized and will be deleted after the study period.

Anonymity, confidentiality, and possible consequences for the participants in the document study were handled in various ways (article 3). The documents were retrieved by me from the children's cases and subsequently anonymized and scanned

into “Services for Sensitive Data¹⁰. ” The documents had serial numbers that corresponded with the number of child welfare offices in which they were retrieved. Consent to retrieve documents was obtained from the management of the child welfare offices, and access to the documents was approved by Bufdir. My two supervisors and I signed a nondisclosure agreement with Bufdir, and I also signed such agreements at the child welfare offices before retrieving the documents. The documents contain sensitive information about third parties and resulted in some ethical dilemmas regarding whether to inform or receive consent from them. This was evaluated in collaboration with the NSD (SIKT) through a data protection impact assessment (DPIA) (Appendix 7). The decision from the DPIA emphasized that the focus on the research was primarily on the child welfare workers’ descriptions and considerations, and it was concluded that the societal benefit of the research was greater than the potential negative privacy issues. A website¹¹ was established to provide collective information about the aims of the research, the data it builds on, and the findings of the thesis.

Analyzing documents containing information on vulnerable children was, however, ethically challenging. To minimize the disadvantage this may have had for the third part, I anonymized directly sensitive information when retrieving the documents, and the documents were only available to me. I carefully extracted only the information I obtained permission for and excluded all sensitive information about the children or their families. I have been careful to not reveal any information that could reveal the identity of the child, parent, or family when reporting the findings. I have also excluded information about the family’s culture and background as well as information about the author of the document.

¹⁰ Services for Sensitive Data are a safe area to save data which requires a high degree of security (<https://www.uio.no/tjenester/it/forskning/sensitiv/mer-om/>)

¹¹ Link to the website: <https://site.nord.no/barnevernnev/>

6 Findings

This chapter provides a brief presentation of the findings of the three articles at the core of this thesis.

Article 1: Ness, S. (2022). A narrow focus in research on emotional abuse. A scoping review of definitions and descriptions on emotional abuse in research on child welfare and social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 1-17.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12967>

This article presents and discusses the results of a scoping review exploring the definitions and descriptions of EA in international research on child welfare and social work. Based on the analysis of the included studies, the following four main themes were generated to make sense of the definitions and descriptions of EA: 1) the volume, nature and characteristics of the studies included, 2) various ways of labeling EA, 3) definitions of EA, and 4) descriptions of EA.

The findings demonstrate that the included studies were characterized by a quantitative research design and limited studies with a qualitative design focusing on subjective descriptions of EA from the perspectives of children, parents, and child welfare professionals. The findings further illuminate that there are various and somewhat inconsistent ways of labeling EA within and between research communities and countries. Thus, the findings indicate a lack of explicit terminology in the reviewed studies and suggest that this lack of terminology may influence the reliability and validity of research as well as affect the nuanced understanding of the similarities and diversities among terms, opportunities for acquiring knowledge of EA, awareness of EA as a phenomenon, and how child welfare workers engage and intervene in EA. The findings further portray that EA is defined and described as a unique concept and as an element of EMT. Despite some variations in the descriptions and definitions of EA and EMT, they share similarities in that they include both an expression of the behaviors

comprising the concept and a statement of how this may harm children's emotional and psychological development.

Article 2: Ness, S. (2023). 'It's not like we use the word emotional abuse'. A study of how Norwegian child welfare workers describe and understand emotional abuse of children. *Child abuse & Neglect* 146.

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This article explores how EA is described and understood by Norwegian child welfare workers (CWWs). When they were asked to describe EA and how they understood it in their work, four main themes were identified across the focus group interviews: 1) It's not like we use the term EA, 2) EA is related to emotional care, 3) Taking a child's perspective on EA, and 4) EA is part of a complex situation.

The findings illustrate that EA is considered a diffuse, intangible, and unfamiliar concept for CWWs. Even though they acknowledge EA as a phenomenon they encounter in their work, they find it hard to describe and articulate their knowledge about what it is and how they engage with this concept. The findings also point out that CWWs was not used to engage in conversations about EA. However, when they were given the opportunity to reflect upon EA, they provided varied and nuanced descriptions of its content. The findings show that the CWWs described EA as creating an unsafe environment in the home that could create fear, insecurity, and unsafety for children. The descriptions of EA further included parental behaviors that are actively harmful, such as threats, verbal violations and manipulations, as well as parental absence of warmth and support in terms of not being sensitive to the child's needs. As such, the findings reveal that CWWs includes both acts of EA and emotional neglect in the understanding of EA. They also described EA as an environment of unsafety that they considered scary for the children. The findings further illustrate that despite varied descriptions of EA, the CWWs does not use the term EA in conversations with children, parents, and other professionals. They are more concerned with describing

children's concrete experiences to promote how these experiences affect children negatively rather than with labeling these experiences as EA. The findings further show that this is also the case in child welfare documents because the CWWs find it hard to make evidence of EA, and are uncertain about how to deal with EA legally.

The findings emphasise that CWWs negotiate their descriptions and understandings of EA with the concept of emotional care because the CWWs tend to talk about parents' competence in emotional care when describing EA. The findings further show that CWWs prefer to use the term "emotional care" rather than "EA." CWWs find this more familiar, neutral, and less scary than EA. Despite this, the findings emphasize that emotional care is also a concept that CWWs finds difficult to describe and explain. The findings also illuminate that even though the participants rarely use the word EA, some CWWs underscore the importance of them being aware of EA and how it harms children. A few also describe how being clear to parents about their concerns about EA has in previous cases helped parents understand the concerns of CWS more clearly, and helped them provide more appropriate help to these families. Thus, the findings highlight the need to strengthen knowledge and awareness about EA in relation to related concepts to enable them to more effectively identify, name, and address EA.

The findings point out that, CWWs highly emphasise promoting the voice and perspectives of the child when describing EA. They underscore conversations with and expressions from the child as crucial when it comes to identifying EA. At the same time, the findings show that some CWWs point out that if they are not aware of the concept of EA, they will not identify it or understand children's experiences as EA, regardless of how many conversations they have with children. The findings further illuminate that that CWWs consider EA as illegal, as other forms of abuse and violence. At the same time, they express uncertainties and challenges when it comes to assessing when parenting behaviors are EA, a parenting practice, or culture. They describe it as challenging to assess how EA harms the child, but they acknowledge the severity of EA and its consequences. The findings also illustrate that EA is understood as one element

in complex situations, and that EA overlaps with other forms of child abuse and violence. The findings indicate that this complexity might affect the level of awareness of EA among CWWs in the different core tasks of child welfare services and that physical abuse and violence seem to be their main concerns because it is considered more concrete and measurable than EA. The findings also portray that, if EA is clearly expressed by children and assessed as severe by the CWW, the word EA is more likely to be expressed clearly in conversations and in child welfare documents. However, the findings suggest that EA might be underreported, under communicated, and underestimated in child welfare work.

Article 3: Ness, S. & Paulsen, V. (in review). Emotional abuse, an invisible aspect in Norwegian child welfare documentation. *Under review for publication.*

This article explores how EA is described and considered in child welfare documents, and in the analysis four main themes were generated: 1) Vague descriptions and limited elaboration of EA, 2) Shifting terminology, 3) Generalized knowledge, 4) Children's clear expressions about abuse and violence are highly emphasised.

In the findings it is illuminated that the term EA is mostly included in the documents by the term, and in the part of the document where children's situation is described. It is unclear whether the term is used by others or if it is a specific description that has led CWWs to use the term when writing the document. It is further portrayed that the documents lack a description or elaboration of what EA is, how it is documented, and what consequences it poses for the children. The findings show that EA is often described along with physical abuse or violence, which emphasizes the overlap between these forms of abuse and underlines the severity of a child's experiences with abuse and violence.

The findings illustrate that the terminology related to EA is shifting within the documents. The term EA is often used when describing the child's situation but is

translated into more general terms such as “violence,” “family violence,” “exposed to violence,” and “witnessing violence” when assessing the child’s situation. This may relate to the varying terminology of child abuse and violence or a limited focus on delineating between different forms of violence and abuse in the child welfare documents. The findings further emphasize that the assessments and justifications of children’s experiences of abuse and violence are characterized by generalized knowledge. In the documents, this is expressed through knowledge about the severe negative consequences of abuse and violence, regardless of form and the specific individual and contextual surroundings of the child. As such, the findings demonstrate that the assessments and justifications are characterized by general assessments, that these assessments and justifications are implicit and invisible and that it is left to the reader to make them explicit. The findings further reveals a need to elaborate on the complexities and subtleties of children’s experiences with different forms of abuse to strengthen the balanced considerations about the right help and support for children with experiences with abuse and violence.

The findings indicate that EA is described and elaborated on in the document if the child is clear about their experiences with EA. One document includes such descriptions, including both actively harmful behaviors such as threats, humiliating and exaggerated criticism, and the absence of parental warmth such as being met on her emotional needs. The descriptions emphasize the harm of EA and how the child felt unloved, unwanted, or not emotionally cared for, which coincides with the conceptualization of EA. The findings further suggest that the authors of the documents must have conceptual knowledge of the concept of EA to interpret children’s experiences as EA and to elaborate on it in the documents. In addition, the findings point out that children’s expressions of child abuse and violence in general are largely emphasized when justifying decisions about out-of-home care.

7 Discussion and conclusion

Starting this chapter, I return to the overall aim of this thesis, which has been to deepen understanding, expand knowledge, and gain nuanced insights into how EA is understood in child welfare work. This aim has been illuminated by the three research questions posed in the articles and in chapter 1.2. I will start this chapter by discussing the findings relating to the overall aim and research questions in a more expanded and nuanced way than in the articles. To do this, I have analytically applied the theoretical concepts and perspectives outlined in chapter 4 as a guide to explore how EA is understood in child welfare work. In this process, two topics for discussion were identified: *an ambiguous and lacking knowledge base of EA* and *framing EA as overarching, rights, norms, and values*. The latter topic are further divided into the rights, norms, and values embedded in emotional care, the zero-tolerance ideal against abuse and violence, and children's right to participate. Referring to the previous chapters, I discuss these topics to provide a more comprehensive picture of how EA is understood in child welfare work. I further discuss some overall methodological considerations of the thesis and present some recommendations and implications for research, policy, and practice. Finally, I account for the contributions of the thesis.

7.1 An ambiguous and lacking knowledge base of emotional abuse

According to the first article, the definitions and descriptions of EA can be related to how knowledge is organized into abstract concepts and scientific knowledge, which relates to the notion of conceptual coherence by Muller (2009). The findings of article 1, however, demonstrate that the terminology, definitions, and operationalization of EA vary, both nationally and internationally. This points to that it is challenging to define EA across contexts (Baker et al., 2021; Iwaniec et al., 2006; Munro, 2020). This is also visible in Norwegian prevalence studies on abuse and violence, as demonstrated in chapter 3.1, and in policy and legislation, which is part of the structural dimension of professional discretion that regulates child welfare work (chapter 2.1; Aadnanes, 2020; Hennum, 2020). Based on the findings of article 1, and chapter 1-3 of this thesis,

I argue that the organization and construction of knowledge of EA based on abstract concepts and theories are challenging because of an ambiguity of the content of the concept and a lack of knowledge of EA from a child welfare perspective. This may affect child welfare workers capacity to understand and engage with EA when they perform their work, which adds to previous research and literature arguing that the variations and challenges of defining EA constrain child welfare workers in how they engage with EA in the different tasks of their work, such as identifying, documenting, and intervening in cases of EA (Aadnanes, 2020; Hennum, 2020; Iwaniec et al., 2006; Iwaniec et al., 2007). This may further hinder child welfare workers' ability to recognize EA as a severe form of abuse and violence, and lead to a delay in intervention in cases of EA, as also pointed out by Baker et al. (2021), and North (2017).

Despite the ambiguous and lacking knowledge base of EA, the findings of articles 2 and 3 demonstrate that child welfare workers try to organize their descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA around the concepts, theories, and scientific knowledge available. However, the findings illuminate that the child welfare workers encounter challenges when applying such concepts, theories, and knowledge to their work and the specific cases they encounter. Across articles 2 and 3, the findings show that the challenges in applying abstract concepts, theories and knowledge to practice affects child welfare workers' possibilities in describing EA. Child welfare workers further describe EA as an unfamiliar and diffuse concept that they find difficult to put into words and articulate their knowledge about. This may also relate to how EA is rarely a part of, and vaguely elaborated on in the child welfare documents included in article 3. Moreover, child welfare workers' challenges in addressing EA are in line with the notion of contextual coherence by Muller (2009), which is characterized as embodied, subjective, and challenging to articulate. The organization and construction of knowledge within this coherence is mainly visible in reasoning, discretion, and actions rather than clearly articulated expressions. In this way, child welfare workers try to organize their descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA in a way that they find adequate for the profession and its mandate. They are, thus, less

concerned with the “right answers,” which is more important when organizing knowledge within conceptual coherence. However, due to child welfare workers’ difficulties of expressing their knowledge about EA in words, this may leave theoretical and professional understandings of EA out of the assessments and decisions in the different tasks of child welfare work. The challenges of applying abstract concepts and theory to practical child welfare work have also been found in previous research on knowledge use in the Norwegian CWS (Heggen & Dahl, 2017). A fundamental aspect of the profession, however, is to apply abstract concepts and theories to specific cases to develop a professional understanding of the problem and to decide on the best solution to solve the problem (Abbott, 1988; Grimen & Molander, 2008; Molander & Smeby, 2008; Molander & Terum, 2013). As such, the challenges in combining abstract concepts and theory about EA to practice, challenge child welfare work with EA.

The abovementioned challenge of articulating knowledge of EA and connecting theory to child welfare work is, in articles 2 and 3, found to affect child welfare work both regarding how EA relates to other concepts and other forms of abuse and violence, how EA is visible in relationships between parents and children, how it is harmful for the individual child, how to assess boundaries between acceptable parenting and EA, and how child welfare workers engage with EA in the core tasks of child welfare work. In this way, the findings illuminate that child welfare workers’ discretionary reasoning concerning how to understand EA and how to make judgments and decisions on how to act in cases of EA is influenced by that the knowledge base of EA is ambiguous and lacking, as well as unfamiliar. Similar findings are pointed out in previous research when it comes to addressing EA, how to assess its harm, and how to engage with it in child welfare work (Bredal et al., 2023; Glaser et al., 2001; Iwaniec et al., 2007; North, 2017). A further consequence of the ambiguity and unfamiliarity of EA may be that it creates an unawareness of EA because it is not available as valid knowledge when child welfare workers exercise professional discretion. EA may, thus, be left out as an understanding of problems which child welfare workers encounter in their work with children. In this way, EA may be left out of investigations, justifications, conversations,

and child welfare documentation, which is illuminated by the findings across articles 2 and 3. Accordingly, EA may be underrecognized, under communicated, and under addressed by professionals in CWS, which also is pointed out in previous research and literature on EA and emotional maltreatment (Baker et al., 2021; Glaser, 2002; Slep et al., 2022; Tonmyr et al., 2011).

Above, I have argued that the findings across the articles suggest that the knowledge base of EA is ambiguous and lacking when it comes to abstract concepts, theories, and knowledge and that EA is considered an unfamiliar and diffuse concept in child welfare work (articles 1-3). The findings of article 2 further demonstrate that child welfare workers have not participated in reflective discussions on EA before the current study. In this way, they have not previously discussed how to organize and construct knowledge of EA in a way that is adequate for the profession and based on their professional experiences. The findings, thus, illuminate that when available concepts, theories and knowledge about EA are not discussed, they are not made relevant or valid in the specific profession. In this way, a lack of professional discussions on EA can affect professional discretion about the concept because there is limited available knowledge for child welfare workers to select, combine, and compare in their efforts to understand EA and how to engage with this concept in their work. As such, I argue that the concepts related to EA are weakly developed within the profession of child welfare services, as also pointed out by Bredal et al. (2023). The findings across articles 2 and 3, thus, add to previous research and literature which has argued that, despite comprehensive definitions and conceptual frameworks of EA and emotional maltreatment, they are not sufficiently applied in child welfare work (Baker et al., 2021; Brassard et al., 2020; Slep et al., 2023). Based on the findings of this thesis, it is reasonable to argue that this is reflected in Norwegian child welfare work, both regarding the lack of research on EA, ambiguity in policy and legislation about EA, and lack of clarity of how EA is understood in child welfare work. This may further relate to that EA is one of the least recognized and addressed forms of abuse and violence in research, policy, and practice (Brassard et al., 2020; Kloppen et al., 2015; Kojan et al.,

2020; Meinck et al., 2016; Ottosen et al., 2020; Stolthenborg et al., 2015). Not recognizing and addressing this form of child abuse and violence, however, may lead to misconceptions of the severity of EA, and to overlooking children with experiences of EA, which is also emphasized by Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen (2018).

7.2 Framing emotional abuse in rights, norms, and values

As demonstrated above, child welfare workers organize and construct their knowledge about EA in line with Muller's (2009) notion of contextual coherence. Based on the findings across the articles 1-3, I argue that the construction of knowledge of EA is ambiguous and partly lacking in both the structural and epistemic dimensions of professional discretion, which causes unfamiliarity and unawareness of EA in CWS. Moreover, the findings in articles 2 and 3, suggest that when the knowledge base of EA is characterized by the abovementioned characteristics, child welfare workers try to organize their knowledge about EA in a way that is useful for their profession. These findings further portray that child welfare workers lean on rights, norms, and values within the CWS when trying to make sense of EA. Rights, norms, and values are widely acknowledged as part of the knowledge base of child welfare services alongside research, theory, professional experiences, and experiences of the individual children and families they encounter (Grimen, 2008; Kleppe, 2023; Kojan & Storhaug, 2023; The Norwegian Directorate for Family Affairs, 2022). Findings of articles 2 and 3 further point out that, when child welfare workers organize their knowledge related to EA, they make use of the knowledge embedded in the rights, norms, and values related to emotional care, the zero-tolerance ideal against child abuse and violence, and children's right to participation. This may relate to the fact that, when the knowledge base of abstract concepts and scientific knowledge is ambiguous and lacking, norms, ideals, and values gain influence on decisions in CWS (Kojan & Christiansen, 2023).

Framing emotional abuse in emotional care

In article 2, the findings indicate that, when child welfare workers organize their knowledge about EA, they tend to discuss whether the emotional care a child receives or whether parents are able to provide is sufficient rather than discussing EA. This may relate to a difference in attention to these two concepts, in the Norwegian child welfare context. Emotional care focuses on children's emotions, how parents acknowledge, validate, and regulate children's emotions, and how parents facilitate children's feelings of love and safety. Moreover, this is considered adequate parenting practices in Norwegian society and in the CWS (Fævelen et al., 2023), which is emphasized in certain theoretical perspectives that have strongly guided child welfare work in recent decades, as noted in chapter 2.3. The purpose clause of the Child Welfare Act (2021, §1-1-) also emphasizes that children should be met with safety, love, and understanding, along with good and safe care conditions. As such, a central feature of the Norwegian CWS is to provide services that aim to improve parental competencies and ensure emotional care for children, which is reflected in the measures initiated and implemented by the CWS (Christiansen & Hollekim, 2018; Krutzinna & Skivenes, 2020). In this way, children's need for sufficient emotional care is pointed out in terms of rights, norms, and values inherent in theoretical perspectives and in the legislation and policy which structures child welfare work. From a professional perspective, emotional care and the knowledge and norms embedded in this concept, thus, affect professional discretion in both the structural and epistemic dimensions. This means that it structures child welfare work through legislation and regulations, and it is considered valid knowledge to base justifications and decisions on. Additionally, available measures in CWS acknowledge emotional care as a core competence in parents (Christiansen & Hollekim, 2018; Fævelen, 2023). Moreover, this enables child welfare workers to select, combine, and compare knowledge about concerns about harmful interactions and relationships in the frames of emotional care. As such, the focus on emotional care in legislation, policy, and practice enables child welfare workers to perform their work, thus providing sufficient measures based on

professional discretion and the best combination of knowledge that child welfare workers hold. In contrast, the findings in article 2, and as pointed out in chapter 2 and 3, the knowledge base in both the structural and epistemic dimensions of profession is not as comprehensive when it comes to EA. This has the potential to constrain child welfare work with EA.

The findings of article 2 illuminate that the norms and knowledge embedded in the term emotional care can overshadow awareness of EA, despite the similar characteristics of these concepts. The definition of EA described in chapter 1.3 underlines that experiences with EA convey to the child, among other things, that the child is worthless, unloved, and unwanted (Brassard et al., 2019, p. 5; Hart et al., 2018, p. 147). Like emotional care, EA is evident in the quality of relationships and interactions between parents and children. This is strongly related to children's emotions and feelings of love and safety and coincides with children's need for sufficient emotional care. Based on the findings in article 2, I argue that it is important to recognize emotional care and EA as two separate constructs while also enabling EA as a concept that child welfare workers are aware of in investigations, conversations, and justifications on measures. As noted by Aadnanes (2017, 2020) understandings of abuse and violence affects how child welfare work acts, in terms of which assistance and response they provide. These understandings affect how child welfare workers perform their work in for example investigations, which measures they choose as the best alternative for children and families, and how CWS relates to their mandate of preventing and protecting children from all forms of abuse and violence, including EA.

The fact that the term emotional care has the potential to overshadow the term EA may also relate to the power of the definition and interpretation that CWS holds, which concerns how certain perspectives are considered more valid or professionally sound in the context of child welfare, hence leading other concepts, theories, or knowledge to be omitted from professional understandings of the situations of children and families (Bjørnebekk & Mevik, 2023; Caspersen & Paulsen, 2019; Haugland, 2008;

Pedersen, 2023). However, omitting EA as a way of understanding harmful interactions and relationships between parents and children may lead children's experiences with EA to be trivialized, to misconceptions of the severity of the situation, as also argued in article 2. Additionally, this offers child welfare workers fewer opportunities to address children's experiences of abuse and violence, which may lead to implementation of measures which are not adjusted or tailored to the individual child and family's situation. This may further lead to leaving EA out of child welfare documents, which affects holistic assessments and decisions on children's situation, decreases children's legal security, and constrains continuity in child welfare work.

As noted above, child welfare workers tend to not use the term EA when assessing harmful interactions and relationships in the family. The findings in article 2 suggest that this can be related to how professionals in CWS must balance different perspectives on EA, as noted in chapter 4.1.2. The findings across articles 2 and 3 illuminate that child welfare workers especially balance the rights perspective and the therapeutic or children's perspective. This may relate to the twofold role CWS have regarding both investigating whether a child is exposed to risk such as EA, and at the same time establishing a collaboration with children and families to provide sufficient help and support to the child (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Feyling & Øfsti, 2023; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2012; Kojan et al., 2020). The findings of article 2 suggest that child welfare workers leave EA, and especially the term "violence," out of conversations and documents to facilitate collaboration, and to establish positive relationships with the family. These findings further illuminate that EA is left out of conversations because concepts such as EA are understood differently by professionals and laypeople, and that the term EA may affect child welfare workers possibilities to provide help and support according to the "best interest of the child", which is emphasized in the child welfare act (2021, §1-3). As such, the findings suggest that child welfare workers replace EA with emotional care as they find it more neutral, and easier to describe and account for their concerns about emotional care to parents than to use the term EA. Despite good reasons for framing experiences of EA in other terms

such as emotional care, leaving EA out of investigations, conversations with parents, or from child welfare documents, may lead child welfare workers to lose focus on EA, overlook children affected by EA, as well as reduce parents' opportunities to fully understand the concerns of the CWS. Leaving EA out of the understanding of a child's situation may further lead to the focus on abuse and violence "disappears" throughout the child welfare case, as also discussed by Bredal et al. (2023) and Kojan et al., (2020).

Framing emotional abuse in the zero-tolerance ideal against child abuse and violence

In addition to leaning on the norms and knowledge embedded in emotional care, the findings in articles 2 and 3, demonstrate how child welfare workers tend to lean on the rights, norms, and knowledge embedded in the zero-tolerance ideal against child abuse and violence developing a professional understanding of EA. This may relate to how children have the right to a life free from all forms of abuse and violence, which is considered both a societal and judicial norm in Norwegian society (Aadnanes, 2017, 2020; Bredal et al., 2023; Feyling & Øfsti, 2023; Kojan et al., 2020). As discussed in articles 2 and 3, the zero-tolerance ideal is, however, challenging when it comes to EA because it requires a dichotomic definition of abuse and violence (Feyling & Øfsti, 2023). As pointed out in article 1 and in chapter 2, the definitions and understandings of EA differ between contexts. This makes it challenging to work with EA from an enforcement point of view (Aadnanes, 2020; Hennum, 2020). The findings, thus, illuminate that child welfare workers encounter challenges when taking a rights perspective on EA because the descriptions of EA in the law differ from other operationalizations of EA. Child welfare workers must further consider individual and contextual aspects of the specific children to come to a professional understanding of a child's situation, and decide on measures which is considered the most appropriate for the child (the Child Welfare Act, 2021, §1-3).

Embedded in the zero-tolerance ideal is knowledge about that violence is harmful for children, despite its form, frequency, and intention, as noted in chapter 2.1. The findings in articles 2 and 3, suggest that, despite being an important political ideal, the

zero-tolerance ideal also has the potential to lead child welfare workers to organize their knowledge about EA around the overall concept of “violence.” Even though the findings of article 2 emphasize that child welfare workers acknowledge the severe consequences of EA, the findings of article 3 demonstrate a tendency that all forms of abuse and violence are equated in the child welfare documents. The findings of article 3 further illuminate that the term violence is used as an overall concept, and that this concept is rarely differentiated into different forms of abuse and violence. As argued in article 3, equating different forms of abuse and violence may help child welfare workers to manage the complexities and challenges of professional work with EA. However, by using “violence” as an overall term that includes EA child welfare workers opportunities for organizing and constructing knowledge that is relevant for EA can be narrowed down. The findings of articles 2 and 3 further suggest that this leads child welfare workers to be more concerned with the physical aspects of child abuse and violence, which they perceive as being more concrete, easier to describe, and more measurable than EA. This has also been emphasized in previous research and literature (Glaser et al., 2001; Iwaniec et al., 2007).

A consequence of directing attention to physical abuse and violence may be that the breadth of children’s experiences with abuse and violence, such as EA, are not recognized or considered when child welfare workers exercise professional discretion in cases of abuse and violence. This is a crucial finding to me because EA is not only considered a standalone form of maltreatment but also understood to be embedded in other forms of child abuse and maltreatment, in parental actions or outcomes for the children (chapter 1.3; Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018). Additionally, it is argued that to make measures in cases of abuse and violence sufficient, the components of EA and emotional maltreatment should be addressed (Brassard et al., 2019; Hart et al., 2018). As such, the findings suggest that leaving EA out of discretionary reasoning in cases of abuse and violence, constrains child welfare workers when investigating children’s needs and ensuring the right help at the right

time which is highly emphasized in child welfare policy (Ministry of Children and Families, 2017, Prop. 73L, 2016-2017; Prop. 133L, 2020-2021).

The findings further point out that the tendency to focus on “violence” as an overall concept, or on physical abuse and violence may relate to child welfare workers uncertainty in how to deal with EA in a legal context. This may relate to that EA is challenging to deal with from an enforcement point of view, and to the ambiguous definitions and descriptions of EA in the law, as well as that the descriptions of EA in legislative texts differs from the definitions and operationalizations of EA. Furthermore, EA is, in the law and policy, described in caregiver actions of what comprises EA, but the law or policy do not provide any thresholds for intervention in cases of EA. Rather, the need for professional discretion to consider the level of harm for the child is emphasized. This is in accordance with previous research which points out that it is challenging to consider the severity of EA because of the unclarity in the law (North, 2017). The findings of articles 2 and 3, further illuminates that it is challenging for child welfare workers to interpret the law and how to provide evidence of EA in a way which is considered valid in the law system both regarding descriptions of EA and valid justifications and assessments about how EA harms the child. This is also pointed out in previous research (Bredal et al., 2023; North, 2017, 2019a)

The findings across articles 2 and 3, further suggest that child welfare workers’ uncertainties in dealing with EA in the context of law, may relate to that the field of child abuse and violence is multidisciplinary and, thus, how EA may be understood differently by different professions with different mandates, such as lawyers and child welfare workers (Aadnanes, 2020; Aakvaag et al., 2016). The findings shed light on how this may lead child welfare workers to leave the concept of EA out of conversations and documents as they struggle to make evidence of EA valid in their meetings with the law system. As pointed out in article 2 this may relate to the challenges of assessing the boundaries between acceptable parenting practices and EA as well as that there is no professional consensus on which parental acts comprise EA Glaser, 2002, 2011;

Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). The findings of this thesis, thus, add to previous research indicating that child welfare workers meet uncertainties in dealing with the law and in their overall work both regarding assessing what EA is, where the boundaries between acceptable, inadequate, and emotionally abusive actions are, as well as assessing whether these actions pose risk of harm for the children, and how to consider the harmful effects of EA (Brown & Ward, 2012; Glaser, 2002; Killén, 2021; North, 2016; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). Moreover, this may lead to an interrogation of how and why cases come to be recognized as EA, which is also emphasized by North (2017).

The findings of article 3 further demonstrate that the knowledge embedded in the zero-tolerance ideal and the knowledge about how “violence” has detrimental effects on children may lead to implicit justifications and assessments of children’s experiences with violence. As discussed in article 3, the findings illuminate that child welfare workers apply abstract knowledge of violence to assessments but leave out the individual and contextual aspects relating to the specific case. This challenges the discretionary reasoning and child welfare workers’ possibilities to articulate how the individual child is affected by the experiences of abuse and violence. Such implicit justifications are in line with Mullers (2009) notion of contextual coherence, which entails that reasoning and actions are subjective, embodied, or silenced. Implicit assessments and justifications may also relate to child welfare workers’ challenges in organizing and constructing knowledge about EA which is relevant in their profession, and thus how the concepts about abuse and violence are weakly developed in the CWS, as discussed in the previous topic, and by Bredal et al., (2023). However, professional discretion and how child welfare workers apply knowledge are based on trust, which requires child welfare workers to be aware of and justify what knowledge their decisions and justifications are based on (Grimen & Molander, 2008; Molander, 2016). When justifications are implicit or when it is not clear which knowledge child welfare workers have based their decisions on, this can cause mistrust to the profession (Grimen & Molander, 2008; Kojan & Storhaug, 2023).

Framing emotional abuse in children's right to participate

In addition to organizing and constructing knowledge about EA in the knowledge and norms embedded in emotional care and the zero-tolerance ideal against abuse and violence, the findings across articles 2 and 3 further demonstrate that child welfare workers strongly emphasize children's perspectives on EA. The findings further illuminate that in the challenges child welfare workers encounter when describing, considering, and understanding EA, children's perspectives on their own situation as a central source of knowledge. Conversations with children are further underlined when it comes to investigation and documentation of EA, as well as in arguments in cases where out-of-home placements were considered necessary. This is in accordance with children's right to participation as a foundation in child welfare work (Child Welfare Act, 2021, §1-4), that all measures initiated by CWS should be based on the best interest of the child (the Child Welfare Act, §1-3), and that child welfare workers has a specific mandate in including children's perspectives by talking to the child and considering their view of the situation (Child Welfare Act, 2021). In this way, children's right to participation strongly structures child welfare work through the structural dimension of discretion as well as being an important value in the epistemic dimension as children's perspectives are considered valid and important for enabling child welfare workers to perform their work.

Despite the strong focus on children's perspectives and their right to participation, the findings from articles 2 and 3, however, shed light on that child welfare workers struggle regarding balancing children's perspectives in a sufficient way when engaging with EA. The findings point out that child welfare workers describe conversations with children as important regarding identifying, disclosing, and documenting EA, which is relevant when it comes to facilitating children's participation. However, this may lead child welfare workers to focus more on the rights perspective on abuse and violence, than on the therapeutic perspective, which entails acknowledging and recognizing the breadth of children's experiences of abuse and violence while downplaying the law. Regarding the mildest principle of intervention which is emphasized in the child

welfare act (2021, §1-10), it is crucial that child welfare workers balance their assessments of potential risk of EA with assessments of appropriate help and support. This may enable CWS to provide sufficient help at the right time, and to reduce the impact EA may have on the child. The balance between assessing risk and assessing the need for support, is also discussed in previous research, which have pointed out that CWS tend to be more concerned with protecting children from potential risks rather than considering what level of support families need (Aadnanes, 2017, 2020; Christiansen et al., 2019; Feyling & Øfsti, 2023). In this way, child welfare workers must balance different perspectives to fulfil the specific mandate CWS has to prevent and protect children from all forms of child abuse and violence, which is also pointed out in research and literature (Aadnanes, 2017, 2020; Aakvaag et al., 2016).

The findings across articles 2 and 3 further point out that when child welfare workers underscore children's expressions on their own experiences with EA, the children are left with a great responsibility regarding their descriptions and insights into their own family situation and relationships. The findings show that child welfare workers are concerned with making space for an "inside" perspective while making space for children's expressions, perceptions, experiences, and wishes. However, experiences of EA are often unknown to the children and youth experiencing it, and they often talk about their experiences with abuse and violence in terms that professionals may not recognize (Aakvaag et al., 2016). Being able to identify and recognize EA through children's perspectives and expressions requires a comprehensive and nuanced knowledge base as well as the ability to connect abstract concepts, theories, and knowledge to the experiences of individual children. This is important for identifying and, thus, helping children who experience EA, because previous research has demonstrated that children express their experiences with EA as the most harmful experiences with abuse and violence (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2018). As also pointed out by Aakvaag et al. (2016), I argue that a nuanced understanding of EA, both when it comes to concepts and theories, as well as how to apply these to child welfare work, is needed to know what to listen and ask for to recognize children's perspectives on EA.

7.3 Methodological considerations

In this chapter, I focus on overall methodological challenges to increase quality for the entire research process and the findings.

An overall challenge in my research is the varying terminology, definitions, and conceptualizations of EA and how my choices regarding terminology and conceptualizations are not unproblematic because different terminology does not always refer to the same phenomenon (articles 1–3; chapter 1.3; Lillevik & Mevik, 2016). I respect and acknowledge these variations as a challenge, and to address them, I have aimed to include a terminology and conceptualization that is recognizable in both national and international contexts (articles 2–3; chapter 1.3). To increase the possibility of mutual understanding and clarify concepts to enhance the quality of my research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), I have outlined my choices related to the terminology and provided thick descriptions of these concepts and the empiri related to the concepts (articles 2 and 3, chapter 1.3). I also asked the participants in the focus group interviews for detailed and nuanced examples of what they considered “emotional violence” and “psychological violence.” Their descriptions coincided with the conceptualizations of EA and EMT outlined in chapter 1.3 in the present thesis, but they used the term “psychological violence” to describe it.

The challenges related to terminology and conceptualizations have led me to use the term EA in English as a synonym for the Norwegian term “psykisk vold,” or “psychological violence.” I argue that the terminology and conceptualization I have made use of make space to illuminate the stated aim of the thesis and, thus, for the definitions, descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA included in the articles. However, I argue that it is important to view the terms psychological and emotional violence in relation to each other in the Norwegian context to acknowledge their similar characteristics, how they overlap, and how they in the literature are considered two concepts with slightly different content. This is visible in, for example,

the definition of Isdal (2000, 2018, s. 51–64) and the definitions and descriptions by Mohaupt (2024, s. 137–138) and is also briefly accounted for in chapter 1.3.

I have used qualitative methodology and the outlined theoretical framework to obtain rich and nuanced insights into the subject under study and to embrace the sensitivity, complexity, and situatedness of how EA is understood in the chosen context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). However, the findings depend on the perspective taken, and I recognize that there are far more perspectives that could have illuminated the aim of this thesis. These could include other theoretical perspectives, as well as the perspectives of children, youth, caregivers, and other professionals. Initially, it was my intention to also include the perspectives of youths with experiences with EA, but this was not conducted. Taking one perspective may have constrained a nuanced understanding of how EA is understood in child welfare work. However, this may also have led to a clear focus on the articles and thesis as a whole. By triangulating the methods as outlined in chapter 5.3, I have tried to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the subject under study as well as to illustrate relationships between the findings in the different articles as findings and topics for discussions emerged across the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This thesis is positioned in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which means that there are multiple realities and understandings of EA and that the findings are considered a co-construction and interpretation of certain versions of realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, knowledge is seen as developing under the influence of cultural, historical, social, and subjective factors (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As such, the findings provide space for several possible insights and interpretations of how EA is understood in child welfare work. In relation to this, it is important to consider that Norwegian child welfare offices are resourced and organized in different ways across geographical areas and by demographics. This affects what cases they usually work with across offices, which may make it difficult for child welfare workers in Norway to recognize the findings, discussions, and

implications of the thesis (Aadnanes, 2017). To address this issue, I have informed the research process by providing rich and detailed details and descriptions and compared my work to previous research in similar contexts to provide as accurate a representation of the findings as possible (Postholm & Jacobsen, 2018). As such, child welfare workers can consider whether the findings are beneficial for them and thus whether they are transferable between contexts (Postholm & Jacobsen, 2018).

All research methods have their strengths and limitations, and this thesis uses three methods of gathering data, as outlined above and in chapter 5.3, where I have also discussed the appropriateness of the chosen method and how they were carried out. The aim could also have been illuminated by, for example, individual interviews to obtain more in-depth insights into the descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). It could also be suitable to perform a more comprehensive review of the documents in a child's case file to explore whether other documents with another audience and purpose entailed other descriptions, considerations, and understandings of EA (Jacobsson, 2021; Prior, 2021). However, documents in CWS are not produced for research purposes, which means that they do not always provide the necessary details to illustrate the research question (Bowen, 2009; Jacobsson, 2021; Prior, 2021). Thus, I aimed to carefully decide which documents would best illuminate the research question as well as adapt to ethical issues in using documents from children's case files as a resource for research.

I find it important to underscore that the knowledge from this thesis contributes to expanding the insights on how EA is understood in child welfare work. The analyses and discussions illuminate nuances and variations in these understandings. However, they do not offer definitive conclusions on how EA should be understood in child welfare work, or standards aiming to structure how CWS should engage with EA. As such, my thesis may be argued to problematize and complicate an already complex topic in a complex work context. I understand and recognize such critiques. However, I argue that the knowledge constructed and the contribution of the thesis relates to

the overall aim of the thesis, and adds to the knowledge base of EA. The contributions will be further accounted for in section 7.6.

7.4 Recommendations and implications for research, policy and practice

Based on the above discussion in chapter 7.1-7.3, the findings emphasize the need to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced knowledge base of EA to contribute valid knowledge for the purpose of child welfare work. EA is a complex concept with a contested nature that changes across contexts. As such, continuous research and the development of knowledge are required to add to a more comprehensive and nuanced knowledge base. Although the present thesis has explored how EA is understood in child welfare work from a professional perspective, there is a further need to enhance knowledge about how child welfare workers engage with EA when they perform their work, how they make use of their knowledge base, and how knowledge about EA is applied to the complexities and practicalities of child welfare work. As such, it would be interesting to research in greater depth the conversations, reflections, and discussions that child welfare workers have in relation to cases of EA but also about how prevailing norms, ideals, and values in CWS enable or constrain child welfare work with EA. The findings also demonstrate the need to include different perspectives when exploring EA. Specifically, the perspectives of children and youth should be included to make this research even more useful for CWS. This can include an inside perspective of their expressions and perceptions of EA as well as their thoughts, meanings, and desires related to the support and measures provided by the CWS.

The present thesis also discusses how legislation and policy structure child welfare work and affects which knowledge is considered valid in child welfare work. Based on this, a more comprehensive and nuanced knowledge base must also be considered in policy. This entails a more explicit recognition of EA as a standalone form of abuse and as embedded in other forms of child abuse, violence, and maltreatment. It is also necessary to acknowledge the different perspectives on child abuse and violence and

discuss how these perspectives are balanced in child welfare work at the political level. The findings further illustrates that the discussions and efforts in preventing and protecting against child abuse and violence are characterized by the zero-tolerance ideal against all forms of abuse and violence. I have discussed how this ideal can be challenging regarding EA, arguing that political debates would benefit from an extension of the zero-tolerance ideal to embrace even more the complexity of child abuse and violence, which can be done by clarifying a view of how child abuse and violence are differentiated to recognize the complexity and breadth of children's experiences with abuse and violence more explicitly.

Discussions about EA would benefit from considering both a narrow and broad conceptualization of EA and from having a high level of reflexivity and sensitivity of the concept of EA in the debate of and efforts to prevent and protect children from abuse and violence. Both research and policy would benefit from an explicit terminology, definitions, and conceptualizations of EA to clarify the concepts and perspectives used on EA, which is argued to affect practice in CWS. However, it is also necessary to acknowledge that knowledge is useful first when applied to practice and to the knowledge child welfare workers already has. As such, it is important to make it possible for professionals to make use of and further develop their knowledge, as well as apply new knowledge to practice to fulfill the purpose of the profession.

For practice, the need for a more comprehensive knowledge base and more nuanced insights into EA and how to understand and engage with EA in child welfare work emphasize the necessity for critical reflection to enhance the integration of abstract concepts and scientific knowledge of EA to make it relevant in the context of child welfare work. Critical reflection and professional discretion of EA, and how it relates to the norms, ideals, and values of society may enhance the awareness of EA and enable child welfare workers to apply abstract concepts and knowledge to the experiences of specific children and families. In this way EA can be carefully considered and addressed in investigations, decisions on measures, conversations, and written documentation.

This may also support child welfare workers in developing their skills in addressing and communicating about EA to manage their complex work with EA more effectively.

As discussed above, CWS should consider both the narrow and broad conceptualization of EA and EMT to recognize the complexity of EA as a standalone form of abuse and violence and as an underlying element of other forms of abuse and violence. This may extend the knowledge and communication about abuse and violence, on measures to support children experiencing EA, as well as support a better understanding of the complexities and subtleties of children's experiences with abuse and violence. In this way, child welfare workers may be supported when making balanced considerations and justifications about the right help and support for children experiencing EA. Moreover, this may help child welfare workers organize and construct knowledge about EA, in a way that enables and creates new insights, perspectives, and expanded understandings of EA and how to engage with it. This may enhance discretionary reasoning in cases of EA and how child welfare workers perform their work with EA in different tasks of child welfare work.

7.5 Contribution of the thesis

The current thesis adds to research on how EA are defined, described, considered, and understood in child welfare work. The thesis has contributed to deeper understanding, expanded knowledge, and nuanced insights into how EA is understood in child welfare work. It has illuminated some of the complexities and challenges inherent in how EA is understood and engaged with in child welfare work. Furthermore, this thesis illuminates the importance of being aware of, developing, and applying knowledge of EA in child welfare work, as well as in political efforts to prevent and protect children from all forms of abuse and violence. As such, the present thesis contributes to research, policy, and practice in the field of child welfare work involving abuse and violence.

This thesis makes both theoretical and methodological contributions to the literature. The theoretical contribution lies in the theoretical framework consisting of theories of profession with an emphasis on how professional discretion and knowledge are fundamental elements of profession and thus professional work with EA in child welfare work. Based on this theoretical framework, I have developed a model (Figure 1) that illuminates the relationships between the applied theories and concepts. As such, the current thesis has contributed language and concepts to discuss how knowledge interacts when child welfare workers attempts to develop an understanding of EA and, thus, exercise professional discretion in cases of EA. This is further the first study in Norway based on a qualitative research methodology on EA in the context of the Norwegian CWS. By using three different methods, the aim of this thesis has been illuminated in depth and from different angles, which has generated insights into the recommendations and implications for further research.

For policy, the present thesis has contributed valuable insights into how political ideals and norms may have unintended negative consequences for child welfare work as well as contributed knowledge about the need to clarify how child abuse and violence are to be differentiated and to acknowledge the complexity and breadth of children's experiences with abuse and violence more explicitly. As such, the current thesis is a welcoming contribution to discussions on how to strengthen child welfare work with child abuse and violence.

For practice, this thesis contributes to the understandings and conceptualisations of EA which may lead to discussions and awareness on the topic. As such, this thesis emphasises the importance of having structures for critical reflection on how to sufficiently apply abstract concepts and scientific knowledge related to EA and its overlapping concepts, rights, norms, and ideals to child welfare work. This may support child welfare workers in making more informed decisions about EA when investigating, communicating about EA with children and parents, including EA in written documentation, here considering the boundaries between EA and acceptable

parenting, the level of harm to the child, and when deciding on support and measures for children experiencing EA.

Overall, the current thesis argues for a need for a more comprehensive and nuanced knowledge base of EA to enable child welfare workers to sufficiently engage with EA. It further argues for a need for professional discussions and critical reflections on how child welfare workers select, combine, and compare knowledge both from the structural and epistemic dimension of professional discretion in their efforts of developing a professional understanding EA. Critical reflection about EA may also support child welfare workers in organizing and constructing knowledge about EA to be relevant for their profession. The thesis contributes to the ongoing dialogue about how to strengthen child welfare work with abuse and violence as well as to discussions about the need to develop concepts that differentiates children's experiences of abuse and violence. This thesis lays a foundation for further research and knowledge development on the topic and contributes to discussion and reflections on tailored help to children experiencing child abuse and violence, and to municipalities' efforts to prevent child abuse and violence.

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Appendix 1: Focus group topic guide

INTERVJUGUIDE OM EMOSJONELL VOLD ANSATTE I KOMMUNALE BARNEVERNTJENESTER

Velkommen til fokusgruppeintervju knyttet til Ph.d. Prosjektet «*Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold*». Jeg setter stor pris på at dere har takket ja til å delta i dette intervjuet, og jeg gleder meg til å snakke med dere og lære av dere. Før intervjuet starter skal jeg informere dere kort om prosjektet og presentere meg. Etter presentasjonen begynner intervjuet som vil vare i en times tid.

Når vi starter intervjuet er fokuset på emosjonell vold som tema. Jeg ønsker å høre deres tanker, refleksjoner og erfaringer knyttet til dette temaet. Her er det ingen svar som har en fasit, ingenting er rett eller galt, og det er fint å få inn flere perspektiv. Intervjuet tas opp på lydbånd, transkriberes og anonymiseres. Dere har signert et informert samtykke der alle rettighetene deres knyttet til dette er beskrevet. Intervjuet har en varighet på i overkant av en time. Det tas opp på lydbånd, transkriberes og anonymiseres. I informasjonsskrivet er rettighetene deres beskrevet. Ikke nøl med å ta kontakt om det er noe dere tenker på knyttet til dette.

Dere kjenner delvis hverandre, men før vi fortsetter kan det være fint å snakke litt sammen om hvordan vi skal ha det her i intervjuet, lage noen enkle grunnregler. Hva tenker dere om det? Hva blir viktig for dere? (Tilpass digitale og fysiske intervju). Bring inn temaet om konfidensialitet. Hvis dere snakker med andre om intervjuet kan dere gjerne si hva vi har snakket om og hva dere selv har sagt om dere vil, men det er fint å ikke si noe om hva andre har sagt.

Nå begynner intervjuet og vi starter med en liten presentasjonsrunde: Jeg kan begynne med å si litt om meg og litt mer om ph.d. studien min, så kan dere fortsette med å si fornavnet deres, noe om utdanning/videreutdanning, team dere jobber på, og erfaring.

Nå fortsetter vi intervjuet, og når dere snakker er det fint om dere sier navnet deres før dere deler tanker og refleksjoner hvis dere husker det. Navnet deres kommer bort når lyd blir til tekst. Når dere snakker må dere gjerne bruke eksempler, men det er fint at dere ikke bruker navn og beskrivelser som gjør at det er gjenkjennbart for andre (utenfor deres tjeneste) hvilke barn og familier dere snakker om. Jeg kommer ikke til å delta i diskusjonen, men å stille spørsmål og strukturere samtalen dere har.

Språk og forståelse av emosjonell vold

- Dette doktorgradsprosjekt handler jo om hvordan emosjonell vold arbeides med i kommunale barneverntjenester – og først er jeg nysgjerrig på: Hva tenker dere om at forskning fokuserer på emosjonell vold?
- Hva tenker dere på når jeg sier emosjonell vold?
 - o Sammenheng med psykisk vold?
 - o Kan dere reflektere litt rundt likheter og forskjeller i begrepene emosjonell vold og emosjonell omsorgssvikt?
- Hvilke erfaringer har dere med å bruke begrep som emosjonell vold når dere snakker med foreldre og barn?

Beskrivelser av emosjonell vold

- Hvordan vil dere beskrive emosjonell vold?
- Hvordan kommer emosjonell til uttrykk i de familiene dere jobber med?
 - o Når kan man kalte slike opplevelser for vold?
 - o Hvordan tror dere emosjonell vold påvirker barn og ungdom?
 - Hvordan føles det for barn å være i et hjem preget av emosjonell vold?
 - o Hva henger emosjonell vold sammen med, hva kan være grunnene til at det oppstår?
 - o Hvis dere tenker tilbake på en samtale dere har hatt med foreldre og barn om emosjonell vold, hvordan beskriver de dette?
 - Hvis dere tenker tilbake på en samtale dere har hatt med foreldre og/eller barn som har omhandlet emosjonell vold – hva har dere da snakket om? Kan dere gjenkalte noen av foreldrenes og barnas reaksjoner og beskrivelser knyttet til dette temaet?
 - Hvordan opplever dere å snakke med foreldre og barn om emosjonell vold?
- Dere har vært innom at det finnes ulike former for vold, hva tenker dere om sammenhengen mellom emosjonell vold og de andre formene for vold?
- Hva er deres inntrykk av holdningene til emosjonell vold – hva det er og hvilke konsekvenser det har for barn?

Arbeid med emosjonell vold

- Hvordan undersøkes og avdekkes emosjonell vold?
- Hvordan dokumenteres arbeidet med emosjonell vold i skriftlige dokumenter?
- Hvilke erfaringer har dere med hjelpetiltak som tilbys familier hvor emosjonell vold er ett av elementene det jobbes med?
 - o Har dere noen eksempler på hvordan hjelpetiltak har blitt tilpasset til familier der barn opplever emosjonell vold? Hva har disse tiltakene fokusert på?
- Man kan tenke seg at det er mange faktorer som påvirker oss som profesjonelle når vi jobber med barn som opplever emosjonell vold – hva tenker dere om det?
 - o Hva er det som bestemmer hvem som ser, hører, føler og tematiserer hva?

Emosjonell vold i utdanning og veiledning

- Hvordan dekkes dette temaet i din utdanning, videreutdanning eller veiledning?
- Når dere jobber med emosjonell vold bruker dere ulik type kunnskap, kan dere si noe om hvilken kunnskap dere benytter dere av når det kommer til emosjonell vold?
- Benevn begrepsbruk: emosjonell, psykisk, psykologisk, vold, omsorgssvikt, mishandling – hvordan tror dere det påvirker forståelsen vår av emosjonell vold (og nærliggende begrep)?

Oppsummering: Hvordan opplever du å ha blitt intervjuet om dette temaet? Hva kjenner du at du blir opptatt av etter dette intervjuet?

Tusen takk for bidragene og deltakelsene. Dette har allerede vært lærerikt for meg, og dette intervjuet er viktig for pågående forskning, og for barn som vokser opp og har behov for hjelp fra barneverntjenesten. Vil minne dere på rettighetene deres – og dere vil få tilgang til publikasjonene etter hvert som de er klare. Hvis det skal være noe dere vil oppklare etter intervjuet er min kontaktinformasjon på informasjonsbrevet. Jeg hører gjerne fra dere.

Følg opp med oppfølgingsspørsmål og forfølg det som er naturlig for forskningsprosjektet.

Appendix 2: Ethical approval from Norwegian social science data services (NSD/SIKT)



Vurdering av behandling av personopplysninger

Referansenummer	Vurderingstype	Dato
210395	DPIA	31.10.2023

Tittel

Kommunale barneverntjenesters forståelse av, og arbeid med emosjonell vold.

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Nord Universitet / Fakultet for lærerutdanning og kunst- og kulturfag / Grunnskole

Prosjektansvarlig

Sigrid Ness

Prosjektperiode

02.09.2019 - 31.07.2024

Kategorier personopplysninger

Alminnelige

Særlige

Lovlig grunnlag

Samtykke (Personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a)

Allmennhetens interesse (Personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav e)

Uttrykkelig samtykke (Personvernforordningen art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a)

Arkivformål i allmennhetens interesse, eller for formål knyttet til vitenskapelig eller historisk forskning eller for statistiske formål (Personvernforordningen art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav j)

Behandlingen av personopplysningene er lovlig så fremt den gjennomføres som oppgitt i meldeskjemaet. Det lovlige grunnlaget gjelder til 31.07.2024.

Meldeskjema **Kommentar**

Personverntjenester har vurdert endringen meldt inn 26.10.2023. Endringen innebærer at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet forlenges til 31.07.2024.

Det er vår vurdering at selv om det er gjort endringer vil ikke endringene ha en påvirkning på personvernrisikoen i prosjektet, og at det derfor ikke er behov for å oppdatere selve DPIA-dokumentet. Prosjektet er fra tidligere vurdert i DPIA. Endringene er beskrevet i meldeskjema på siden Varighet. Vi forutsetter at forlengelsen godkjennes av Bufdir.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til oss ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde: <https://sikt.no/melde-endringar-i-meldeskjema> Du må vente på svar fra oss før endringen gjennomføres.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKET

Personverntjenester vil følge opp underveis (hvert annet år) og 30 dager før planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet/pågår i tråd med den behandlingen som er dokumentert.

Lykke til videre med prosjektet!

Appendix 3: Ethical approval from the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir)



Sigrid Ness
Bergittavegen 5
7021 Trondheim

Deres ref: Vår ref: 2019/59645-12 Arkivkode: 041 Dato: 07.01.2021

Vedtak om innsyn i taushetsbelagte opplysninger til bruk for forskning – «Emosjonell vold. En kvalitativ studie av unge voksne med egenlevd erfaring, og ansatte i kommunal barneverntjeneste. Beskrivelse og opplevelser»

Barne-, ungdoms- og familielidirektoratet (Bufdir) viser til deres søknad av datert 26. november 2019, om fritak fra taushetsplikt for forskning i forbindelse med ovennevnte forskningsprosjekt, samt etterfølgende korrespondanse.

Etter delegasjon fra departementet har Bufdir i henhold til forvaltningsloven § 13 d myndighet til å treffen vedtak om at et forvaltningsorgan kan eller skal gi taushetsbelagte opplysninger til bruk for forskning når «det finnes rimelig og ikke medfører uforholdsmessig ulykke for andre interesser».

Hovedformålet med ovennevnte forskningsprosjekt er å forstå hvordan emosjonell vold beskrives og erfarer i barneverntjenesten og hos unge med egen erfaring med fenomenet. Det overordnede målet er å utvikle forskningsbasert og erfaringsbasert kunnskap om emosjonell vold, for å i enda større grad kunne operasjonalisere begrepet og gjøre det mer praksisnært og håndfast.

Som en del av prosjektet skal det gjennomføres en kvalitativ analyse av inntil 50 barnevernsjournaler fra fem kommuner fra tidsrommet 1.1.2014–1.7.2020. Søker har fått bekreftet fra kommunene at disse vil hjelpe til med å finne journaler som inneholder opplysninger om emosjonell vold. Dette bidrar til å unngå at søker får tilgang til en unødvendig stor mengde taushetsbelagt overskuddsinformasjon.

Søker har forklart hvorfor samtykke eller anonymisering ikke kan anvendes i dette tilfellet, og har derfor søkt om fritak fra taushetsplikten for å få tilgang til disse journalene. Ved gjennomgangen vil søker få tilgang til fullstendige barnevernsjournaler, men fokuset vil være på tematisering og beskrivelser av emosjonell vold, ikke på personlige opplysninger. Det er kun ved journalgjennomgangen at søker vil ha tilgang til direkte identifiserbare personopplysninger.

Det vil registreres opplysninger om kjønn, fødselsår, antall dokumenter som omhandler beskrivelser av emosjonell vold, hvilke dokumenter som omhandler beskrivelser av emosjonell vold, hvem som har skrevet om samspill som minner om emosjonell vold, hvilke hjelptjenester som har tilbudt hjelp til familien og hvilke ord som brukes for å beskrive emosjonell vold. Navn på

Organisasjonsnr:	Saksbehandler: Alf Robin Gundersen Minothi	Postboks 2233 3103 Tønsberg
www.bufdir.no	986 128 433	postmottak@bufdir.no
		Telefon: 466 15 000

jurnaleier vil derimot ikke lagres. Helseopplysninger vil ikke registreres og de lagrede opplysningsene vil ikke kobles sammen med andre opplysninger. All videre behandling av data vil dermed foregå uten direkte personidentifiserende opplysninger. Når resultatene publiseres vil det ikke være mulig å identifisere jurnaleierne eller andre.

Bufdir mener at den aktuelle delen av forskningsprosjektet utvilsomt vil kunne være samfunnsnyttig, ved å bidra til utvidet kunnskap om temaet emosjonell vold hos blant annet ansatte i barneverntjenesten. Resultatet av prosjektet vil kunne komme samfunnet, herunder den utsatte gruppen, til gode.

Søknaden er forelagt for Rådet for taushetsplikt og forskning. I brev av 30. desember 2020 har Rådet samtykket til at Bufdir gir dispensasjon fra taushetsplikten i tråd med søknaden. Rådets uttalelse følger vedlagt.

Så vidt vi forstår er det kun prosjektansvarlig Sigrid Ness som vil gjennomgå journalene og dermed få tilgang til direkte personidentifiserende opplysninger. Ut fra de opplysningsene som registreres anses risikoen for bakveisidentifikasjon minimal. Det anses likevel hensiktsmessig at de to veilederne får fritak fra taushetsplikten, men det forutsettes da at de ikke behandler taushetsbelagte opplysninger i større grad enn hva som er helt nødvendig.

I medhold av forvaltningsloven § 13 d første ledd beslutter Bufdir at følgende personer gis innsyn i taushetsbelagte journaler i henhold til søknaden:

- Sigrid Ness, prosjektansvarlig, stipendiat i studier av profesjonspraksis, Nord universitet
- Natallia Bahdanovich Hanssen, veileder, førsteamanuensis i spesialpedagogikk, Nord universitet
- Veronika Paulsen, veileder, førsteamanuensis og forskningsleder barnevern, NTNU Samfunnsforskning

Det forutsettes at prosjektet godkjennes av NSD og at all befatning med taushetsbelagte opplysninger vil foregå på en faglig forsvarlig måte, samt at det ikke fremgår personidentifiserende opplysninger ved publikasjoner. Det forutsettes også at alle taushetsbelagte opplysninger slettes innen 31. desember 2023, slik som angitt i søknaden.

Videre stilles det som vilkår at alle de ovennevnte underskriver vedlagte taushetserklæringer, hvor det henvises til forvaltningsloven § 13 e om forskeres taushetsplikt. Vi ber om at disse underskrives og returneres til oss, og at det vises til vår referanse i saken.

Dette vedtaket kan påklages til Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet i henhold til forvaltningsloven § 28, jf. § 2. Klagefristen er tre uker fra melding om vedtaket er mottatt. En eventuell klage sendes til Bufdir.

Med hilsen

Marija Nissen Rosenqvist
avdelingsdirektør

Alf Robin Gundersen Minothi
rådgiver

Dokumentet er godkjent elektronisk og har derfor ikke håndskrevet signatur.

Vedlegg:

- Uttalelse fra Rådet for taushetsplikt og forskning datert 30.12.20
- Taushetserklærin

Tenk miljø – velg digital postkasse fra e-Boks eller Digipost på www.norge.no

Appendix 4: Agreement of collaboration with the child welfare offices



Avtale om samarbeid om forskning på: «Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med Emosjonell vold»

Denne avtalen er inngått mellom Barneverntjenesten i X kommune og stipendiat Sigrid Ness, ved Nord universitet. Avtalen omhandler deltagelse i forskningsprosjektet «Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold». Prosjektet fokuserer på hvordan emosjonell vold beskrives og vurderes i kommunale barneverntjenester gjennom å analysere hvilke ord og beskrivelser som brukes om dette fenomenet i ulike dokumenter i barns mapper. Prosjektet fokuserer også på de profesjonelles skjønnsutøvelse knyttet til emosjonell vold.

Dette forskningsprosjektet er et PhD. Prosjekt finansiert av Nord universitet. Stipendiat og prosjektleader er Sigrid Ness som er stipendiat i studier av profesjonspraksis, og ansatt ved Fakultet for lærerutdanning, kunst og kulturfag ved Nord universitet. Veiledere i PhD. prosjektet er Førsteamanuensis i spesialpedagogikk ved Nord universitet, Natallia Bahdanovich Hanssen, og Førsteamanuensis og forskningsleder barnevern ved NTNU Samfunnsforskning, Veronika Paulsen.

Prosjektet gjennomføres i perioden 2019-2022. Datainnsamlingen i kommunene vil hovedsakelig foregå vinteren 2021. I tillegg vil kommunene inviteres til å delta videre i prosjektet gjennom å delta i referansegruppe hvor det presenteres og diskuteres foreløpige funn. Stipendiat har, under veiledning, ansvar for gjennomføringen av forskningsprosjektet med blant annet datainnsamling, rapportering, ivaretakelse og innhenting av forskningsetiske retningslinjer og godkjenninger. Kommunen/barneverntjenesten bistår med å legge til rette for at forskningsprosjektet får tilgang til nødvendige data som kan belyse problemstillingene gjennom tilgang til dokumenter og deltagelse i fokusgruppeintervju.

Kommunen/tjenesten legger til rette for følgende:

- Velger ut 10 mapper som møter gjennomgåtte inklusjonskriterier.
- Legger til rette for at stipendiat kan være tilstede ved tjenesten den tiden det tar å innhente informasjon fra de 10 utvalgte mappene. **Dette gjennomføres i uke: X**
- Hjelper til å rekruttere 3-4 ansatte som kan delta i ett fokusgruppeintervju med fokus på forståelsen av emosjonell vold. Gjerne representanter fra ulike team dersom tjenesten er organisert på den måten. Intervjuet har en varighet på opp til 1.5 time, og gjennomføres i tjenestens lokaler. **Fokusgruppeintervju gjennomføres i uke: 14 eller 16**
- Deltakelse i referansegruppe med 2-3 møter i løpet av prosjektperioden – dersom ønskelig fra tjenestens side.

Prosjektet legger til rette for følgende:

- Deltakelse i forskningsarbeid som gir mulighet for faglig refleksjon rundt egen praksis.
- Stipendiat kan bidra med innlegg og/eller delta på fagmøter om tematikk knyttet til prosjektet i løpet av prosjektperioden.
- Funn fra prosjektet presenteres for barneverntjenesten ved avslutning av prosjektet.

Det legges opp til en samarbeidende tilnærming i prosjektet når det gjelder gjennomføring. Spørsmål som oppstår i forhold til gjennomføringen av prosjektet drøftes mellom prosjektleder og barnevernleder, eller annen ansvarlig i kommunen/barneverntjenesten.

Sted/dato

Prosjektleder

Barnevernleder/ansvarlig i kommunen/tjenesten

Appendix 5: Information letter and consent for the focus group study

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet

Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å utvikle kunnskap om hvordan emosjonell vold beskrives, vurderes og forstås i kommunal barneverntjeneste. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva det vil innebære for deg å delta.

Formål

Jeg gjennomfører denne studien som en del av mitt doktorgradsprosjekt. Prosjektet er todelt og består av analyse av dokumenter i barns mapper i kommunale barneverntjenester, og fokusgruppeintervju med ansatte i kommunale barneverntjenester. Med denne studien er det ønskelig å utvikle en tydeligere forståelse av hvordan emosjonell vold beskrives og forstås, og på denne måten bidra til å legge mening i fenomenet, operasjonalisere definisjoner og gjøre disse mer praksisnære med et overordnet mål om å bidra til verdifull kunnskap knyttet til forebygging, identifisering og intervenering i familier som opplever emosjonell vold.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Nord Universitet er ansvarlig for prosjektet, og jeg, Sigrid Ness, er prosjektleder. Jeg får veiledning av førsteamansis Natallia Bahdanovich Hansen ved Nord universitet og førsteamansis og forskningsleder for barnevern ved NTNU Samfunnsforskning, Veronika Paulsen.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Du får spørsmål om å delta i studien hvor jeg skal gjennomføre 5 fokusgruppeintervju med ansatte i ulike kommunale barneverntjenester. Du får denne informasjonen fra din leder, da barneverntjenesten du jobber ved deltar i dette forskningsprosjektet.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Hvis du velger å delta i prosjektet innebærer det at du deltar i et fokusgruppeintervju med meg og 3-4 av dine kollegaer. Intervjuet er planlagt å ha en varighet på omtrent 1 time og vil handle om hvordan du forstår emosjonell vold i ditt arbeid i barneverntjenesten. Spørsmålene i intervjuet vil omhandle sine erfaringer, tanker, refleksjoner og opplevelser knyttet til arbeid med emosjonell vold i din jobb. Intervjuet vil ha en tematisk inngang, der enkelt barn og familier ikke skal diskuteres. Eksempler fra praksis kan brukes, men må gjengis anonymt.

Jeg vil avtale tidspunkt for intervjuet med din barnevernleder. Jeg tar lydopptak og notater fra intervjuet. Jeg ber også om mulighet til å kontakte deg en gang etter intervjuet hvis det er behov for klargjøringer. Intervjuet er planlagt å gjennomføres fysisk, men kan bli utført digitalt eller som individuelle intervju dersom smitteverntiltak tilskier det.

Det er frivillig å delta

- Undertegn samtykkeerklæring på siste side om du vil delta.
- Du kan trekke deg når som helst uten grunn. Dette gir ingen negative konsekvenser for deg.
- Hvis du trekker deg fra prosjektet kan du kreve å få slettet alle opplysninger om deg, så lenge opplysningene ikke allerede har vært med i analyser eller vitenskapelige publikasjoner.
- Hvis du senere ønsker å trekke deg, eller har spørsmål til prosjektet kan du kontakte prosjektleder eller personvernombud ved Nord universitet.

Ditt personvern og dine rettigheter – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

- Opplysningene om deg vil bare brukes til formålene jeg har fortalt om i dette skrivet.
- Opplysningene vil behandles konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.
- Du har rett til innsyn i hvilke opplysninger som er registrert om deg og til å få rettet på eventuelle feil i de opplysningene som er registrert.
- All informasjon blir anonymisert, og ingen personopplysninger kan gjenkjennes i publikasjoner av datamaterialet. Det vil bli brukt sitater fra intervjuene som du kan kjenne deg igjen i. Disse sitatene vil være anonyme, slik at ingen andre kan spore sitatene tilbake til deg. Det er bare prosjektleder som vil ha tilgang til disse opplysningene.

- Alle opplysninger vil bli behandlet uten opplysninger som kan gjøre at du blir gjenkjent. Navnet og kontaktopplysningene dine vil jeg erstatte med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste som er trygt og sikkert lagret.
- Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til å få innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert som deg, og du kan få slettet personopplysninger om deg. Du kan også få utlevert en kopi av alle dine personopplysninger, og ved behov sende en klage til personvernombudet eller datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?

Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes senest 01.12.23. Personopplysningene og lydopptak vil da slettes.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

- Opplysninger om deg behandles basert på ditt samtykke.
- Etter ny personopplysningslov har behandlingsansvarlig, Nord universitet, og prosjektleader Sigrid Ness et selvstendig ansvar for å sikre at behandlingen av dine opplysninger har et lovlig grunnlag. Dette prosjektet har rettslig grunnlag i EUs personvernforordning artikkel 6 nr. 1a o artikkel 9 nr 2a og ditt samtykke.
- Du har rett til å klage på behandlingen av dine opplysninger til Datatilsynet.

På oppdrag fra Nord universitet har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i denne delstudien i prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- Prosjektleder Sigrid Ness. E-post: sigrid.ness@nord.no, Tlf: 97 50 19 32.
- Personvernombud Nord universitet: E-post: personvernombud@nord.no, Tlf: 74 02 27 50
- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS. E-post: personverntjenester@nsd.no, Tlf: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

Sigrid Ness
Stipendiat Nord universitet
førsteamanuensis,

Natallia B. Hanssen
Veileder, førsteamanuensis,
Nord universitet

Veronika Paulsen
Veileder,
NTNU

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet *Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold*, og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- å delta i fokusgruppeintervju.

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet, ca. 01.12.23

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix 6: Agreement with the professional typist

Databehandleravtale angående transkribering av fokusgruppeintervju i doktorgradsprosjektet

«Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold»

I henhold til gjeldende norsk personopplysningslovgivning og forordning (EU) 2016/679 av 27. april 2016, Artikkel 28 og 29, jf. Artikkel 32-36, inngår følgende avtale

mellanom

Sigrid Ness

Nord universitet

Org.nr: 970 940 243

(behandlingsansvarlig)

og

.....
(databehandler)

1. Avtalens hensikt

Avtalens hensikt er å regulere rettigheter og plikter i henhold til gjeldende norsk personopplysningslovgivning og forordning (EU) 2016/679 av 27. april 2016 om vern av fysiske personer i forbindelse med behandling av personopplysninger og om fri utveksling av slike opplysninger, samt om oppheving av direktiv 95/46/EF.

Avtalen skal sikre at personopplysninger ikke brukes ulovlig, urettmessig eller at opplysningene behandles på måter som fører til uautorisert tilgang, endring, sletting, skade, tap eller utilgjengelighet.

Avtalen regulerer databehandlers forvaltning av personopplysninger på vegne av den behandlingsansvarlige, herunder innsamling, registrering, sammenstilling, lagring, utlevering eller kombinasjoner av disse, i forbindelse med bruk av/behandling i doktorgradsprosjektet «Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold».

Ved motstrid skal vilkårene i denne avtalen gå foran databehandlers personvernerklæring eller vilkår i andre avtaler inngått mellom behandlingsansvarlig og databehandler i forbindelse med bruk av/behandling i doktorgradsprosjektet «Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold».

2. Formålsbegrensning

Formålet med databehandlers forvaltning av personopplysninger på vegne av behandlingsansvarlig, er å transkribere 5 fokusgruppeintervju tilknyttet doktorgradsprosjektet.

Personopplysninger som databehandler forvalter på vegne av behandlingsansvarlig kan ikke brukes til andre formål uten at dette på forhånd er godkjent av behandlingsansvarlig.

Databehandler kan ikke overføre personopplysninger som omfattes av denne avtalen til samarbeidspartnere eller andre tredjeparter uten at dette på forhånd er godkjent av behandlingsansvarlig, jf. punkt 10 i denne avtalen.

3. Instrukser

Databehandler skal følge de skriftlige og dokumenterte instrukser for forvaltning av personopplysninger i doktorgradsprosjektet «Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold» som behandlingsansvarlig har bestemt skal gjelde.

Nord forplikter seg til å overholde alle plikter i henhold til gjeldende norsk personopplysningslovgivning som gjelder ved bruk av/behandling i doktorgradsprosjektet «Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold» til behandling av personopplysninger.

Databehandler forplikter seg til å varsle behandlingsansvarlig dersom databehandler mottar instrukser fra behandlingsansvarlig som er i strid med bestemmelsene i gjeldende norsk personopplysningslovgivning.

4. Opplysningsstyper og register

Databehandleren forvalter følgende personopplysninger på vegne av behandlingsansvarlig i forbindelse med levering og administrasjon av doktorgradsprosjektet «Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold»

- Fornavn og arbeidssted, profesjon.
- Fokusgruppeintervjuene er på lydfil.

Personopplysningene gjelder følgende registrerte:

- Ansatte i kommunale barneverntjenester som deltar i fokusgruppeintervju i doktorgradsprosjektet. Deltakere har underskrevet informert samtykke som inkluderer informasjon om at intervjuet skal transkriberes av ekstern aktør.

5. De registrertes rettigheter

Databehandler plikter å bistå behandlingsansvarlig ved ivaretakelse av den registrertes rettigheter i henhold til gjeldende norsk personopplysningslovgivning.

Den registrertes rettigheter inkluderer retten til informasjon om hvordan hans eller hennes personopplysninger behandles, retten til å kreve innsyn i egne personopplysninger, retten til å kreve retting eller sletting av egne personopplysninger og retten til å kreve at behandlingen av egne personopplysninger begrenses.

I den grad det er relevant, skal databehandler bistå behandlingsansvarlig med å ivareta de registrertes rett til dataportabilitet og retten til å motsette seg automatiske avgjørelser, inkludert profilering.

Databehandler er erstatningsansvarlig overfor de registrerte dersom feil eller forsømmelser hos databehandler påfører de registrerte økonomiske eller ikke-økonomiske tap som følge av at deres rettigheter eller personvern er krenket.

6. Tilfredsstillende informasjonssikkerhet

Databehandler skal iverksette tilfredsstillende tekniske, fysiske og organisatoriske sikringstiltak for å beskytte personopplysninger som omfattes av denne avtalen mot uautorisert eller ulovlig tilgang, endring, sletting, skade, tap eller utilgjengelighet.

Databehandler skal dokumentere egen sikkerhetsorganisering, retningslinjer og rutiner for sikkerhetsarbeidet, risikovurderinger og etablerte tekniske, fysiske eller organisatoriske sikringstiltak. Dokumentasjonen skal være tilgjengelig for behandlingsansvarlig.

Databehandler skal etablere kontinuitets- og beredskapsplaner for effektiv håndtering av alvorlige sikkerhetshendelser. Dokumentasjonen skal være tilgjengelig for behandlingsansvarlig.

Databehandler skal gi egne ansatte tilstrekkelig informasjon om og opplæring i informasjonssikkerhet slik at sikkerheten til personopplysninger som behandles på vegne av behandlingsansvarlig blir ivaretatt.

Databehandler skal dokumentere opplæringen av egne ansatte i informasjonssikkerhet. Dokumentasjonen skal være tilgjengelig for behandlingsansvarlig.

- Databehandlingene beskrives nærmere i DPIA gjennomført i samarbeid med NSD og godkjent av personvernombud og dekan ved Nord universitet.

7. Taushtsplikt

Kun ansatte hos databehandler som har tjenstlige behov for tilgang til personopplysninger som forvaltes på vegne av behandlingsansvarlig, kan gis slik tilgang. Databehandler plikter å dokumentere retningslinjer og rutiner for tilgangsstyring. Dokumentasjonen skal være tilgjengelig for behandlingsansvarlig.

Ansatte hos databehandler har taushtsplikt om dokumentasjon og personopplysninger som vedkommende får tilgang til i henhold til denne avtalen. Denne bestemmelsen gjelder også etter avtalens opphør. Taushtsplikten omfatter ansatte hos tredjeparter som utfører vedlikehold (eller liknende oppgaver) av systemer, utstyr, nettverk eller bygninger som databehandler anvender for å levere eller administrere/annen type behandling (navn på tjeneste/prosjekt).

Norsk lov vil kunne begrense omfanget av taushtsplikten for ansatte hos databehandler og tredjeparter.

8. Tilgang til sikkerhetsdokumentasjon

Databehandler plikter å gi behandlingsansvarlig tilgang til all sikkerhetsdokumentasjon som er nødvendig for at behandlingsansvarlig skal kunne ivareta sine forpliktelser i henhold til gjeldende norsk personopplysningslovgivning.

Databehandler plikter å gi behandlingsansvarlig tilgang til annen relevant dokumentasjon som gjør det mulig for behandlingsansvarlig å vurdere om databehandler overholder vilkårene i denne avtalen.

Ansatte hos behandlingsansvarlig har taushtsplikt for konfidensiell sikkerhetsdokumentasjon som databehandler gjør tilgjengelig for behandlingsansvarlig.

9. Varslingsplikt ved sikkerhetsbrudd

Databehandler skal uten ubegrunnet opphold varsle behandlingsansvarlig dersom personopplysninger som forvaltes på vegne av behandlingsansvarlig utsettes for sikkerhetsbrudd som innebærer risiko for krenkelser av de registrertes personvern.

Varslet til behandlingsansvarlig skal som minimum inneholde informasjon som beskriver sikkerhetsbruddet, hvilke registrerte som er berørt av sikkerhetsbruddet, hvilke personopplysninger som er berørt av sikkerhetsbruddet, hvilke strakstiltak som er iverksatt for å håndtere sikkerhetsbruddet og hvilke forebyggende tiltak som eventuelt er etablert for å unngå liknende hendelser i fremtiden.

Behandlingsansvarlig er ansvarlig for at varsler om sikkerhetsbrudd fra databehandler blir videreforsynt til Datatilsynet.

10. Underleverandører

Databehandler plikter å inngå egne avtaler med underleverandører til doktorgradsprosjekten «Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold» som regulerer underleverandørenes forvaltning av personopplysninger i forbindelse med levering og administrasjon av/annen type behandling i doktorgradsprosjekten «Kommunale barneverntjenesters arbeid med emosjonell vold»

I avtaler mellom databehandler og underleverandører skal underleverandørene pålegges å ivareta alle plikter som databehandleren selv er underlagt i henhold til denne avtalen. Databehandler plikter å forelegge avtalene for behandlingsansvarlig etter forespørsel.

Databehandler skal kontrollere at underleverandører til (navn på tjeneste/prosjekt) overholder sine avtalemessige plikter, spesielt at informasjonssikkerheten er tilfredsstillende og at ansatte hos underleverandører er kjent med sine forpliktelsjer og oppfyller disse.

Behandlingsansvarlig godkjener at databehandler engasjerer følgende underleverandører i forbindelse med levering og administrasjon av/annen type behandling (navn på tjeneste/prosjekt):

Ingen underleverandører
(navn på underleverandører).

Databehandler kan ikke engasjere andre underleverandører enn de som er nevnt ovenfor uten at dette på forhånd er godkjent av behandlingsansvarlig.

Databehandler er erstatningsansvarlig overfor behandlingsansvarlig for økonomiske tap som påføres behandlingsansvarlig og som skyldes ulovlig eller urettmessig behandling av personopplysninger eller mangelfull informasjonssikkerhet hos underleverandører til (navn på tjeneste/prosjekt).

11. Overføring til land utenfor EU/EØS

- Skal ikke overføres til land utenfor EU/EØS.

Personopplysninger som databehandler forvalter i henhold til denne avtalen, vil bli overført til følgende mottakerland utenfor EU/EØS:

Skal ikke overføres til land utenfor EU/EØS.
(navn på mottakerland).

Det rettslige grunnlaget for overføring av personopplysninger til de nevnte mottakerland utenfor EU/EØS er:

Ikke aktuelt
(kort redegjørelse for overføringsgrunnlaget).

Tiltak som er iverksatt for å sikre at beskyttelsesnivået er tilsvarende som i EØS:

Ikke aktuelt
(redegjørelse for tiltakene).

12. Sikkerhetsrevisjoner og konsekvensutredninger

Databehandler skal jevnlig gjennomføre sikkerhetsrevisjoner av eget arbeid med sikring av personopplysninger mot uautorisert eller ulovlig tilgang, endring, sletting, skade, tap eller utilgjengelighet.

Databehandler skal gjennomføre sikkerhetsrevisjoner av informasjonssikkerheten i (navn på tjeneste/prosjekt). Sikkerhetsrevisjoner skal omfatte databehandlers sikkerhetsmål og sikkerhetsstrategi, sikkerhetsorganisering, retningslinjer og rutiner for sikkerhetsarbeidet, etablerte tekniske, fysiske og organisatoriske sikringstiltak og arbeidet med informasjonssikkerhet hos underleverandører til (navn på tjeneste/prosjekt). Det skal i tillegg omfatte rutiner for varsling av behandlingsansvarlig ved sikkerhetsbrudd og rutiner for testing av beredskaps- og kontinuitetsplaner.

Databehandler skal dokumentere sikkerhetsrevisjonene. Behandlingsansvarlig skal gis tilgang til revisjonsrapportene.

Dersom en uavhengig tredjepart gjennomfører sikkerhetsrevisjoner hos databehandler, skal behandlingsansvarlig informeres om hvilken revisor som benyttes og få tilgang til oppsummeringer av revisjonsrapportene.

13. Tilbakelevering og sletting

Ved opphør av denne avtalen plikter databehandler å slette og tilbakelevere alle personopplysninger som forvaltes på vegne av behandlingsansvarlig i forbindelse med levering og administrasjon av/behandling i (navn på tjeneste/prosjekt). Behandlingsansvarlig bestemmer hvordan tilbakelevering av personopplysningene skal skje, herunder hvilket format som skal benyttes.

Databehandler skal slette personopplysninger fra alle lagringsmedier som inneholder personopplysninger som databehandler forvalter på vegne av behandlingsansvarlig. Sletting skal skje ved at databehandler skriver over personopplysninger innen 21 dager etter avtalens opphør. Dette gjelder også for sikkerhetskopier av personopplysningene.

Databehandler skal dokumentere at sletting av personopplysninger er foretatt i henhold til denne avtalen. Dokumentasjonen skal gjøres tilgjengelig for behandlingsansvarlig.

Databehandler dekker alle kostnader i forbindelse med tilbakelevering og sletting av de personopplysningene som omfattes av denne avtalen.

14. Mislighold

Ved mislighold av vilkårene i denne avtalen som skyldes feil eller forsømmelser fra databehandlers side, kan behandlingsansvarlig si opp avtalen med øyeblikkelig virkning. Databehandler vil fortsatt være pliktig til å tilbakelevere og slette personopplysninger som forvaltes på vegne av behandlingsansvarlig i henhold til bestemmelsene i punkt 13 ovenfor.

Behandlingsansvarlig kan kreve erstatning for økonomiske tap som feil eller forsømmelser fra databehandlers side, inkludert mislighold av vilkårene i denne avtalen, har påført behandlingsansvarlig, jf. også punkt 5 og 10 ovenfor.

15. Avtalens varighet

Denne avtalen gjelder så lenge databehandler forvalter personopplysninger på vegne av behandlingsansvarlig. Avtalen gjelder til 01.07.21. Avtalen kan sies opp av begge parter med en gjensidig frist på 14 dager

16. Kontaktpersoner

Kontaktperson hos databehandler for spørsmål knyttet til denne avtalen er: Sigrid Ness

Kontaktperson hos behandlingsansvarlig for spørsmål knyttet til denne avtalen er: Heidi Fors

17a. Lovvalg og verneting

Avtalen er underlagt norsk rett og partene vedtar Trøndelag tingrett som verneting. Dette gjelder også etter opphør av avtalen.

Denne avtale er i 2 – to eksemplarer, hvorav partene har hvert sitt.

Sted og dato

På vegne av behandlingsansvarlig

På vegne av databehandler

.....
(underskrift)

.....
(underskrift)

Appendix 7: Data Protection Impact Assessment



Vår ref.: 210395

Rådgiver: IN

Dato: 14.09.2020

NSD - Personvernkonsekvensvurdering

Prosjekttittel: Emosjonell vold. En kvalitativ studie av hvordan emosjonell vold beskrives og oppfattes av ungdom med egenlevd erfaring, og ansatte i kommunal barneverntjeneste.

Behandlingsansvarlig: Nord universitet / Fakultet for lærerutdanning og kunst- og kulturfag / Grunnskole. Faggruppe for logopedi, tilpassa opplæring og spesialpedagogikk.

Prosjektansvarlig: Sigrid Ness (stipendiatur).

Referansenummer NSD: 210395

1 Om konsekvensvurderingen (DPIA)

NSD har gjennomgått innholdet i meldeskjemaet. Det er vår vurdering at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil innebære relativt høy risiko for de registrertes rettigheter og friheter, og dermed krever en personvernkonsekvensvurdering (DPIA) jf. personvernforordningen art. 35.

Dette fordi den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger innebærer

- behandling av særlige kategorier av personopplysninger (sensitive opplysninger)
- behandling av personopplysninger i stor skala, både med hensyn til utvalgsstørrelse, mengde opplysninger, varighet og regelmessighet
- at de registrerte hindres i å utøve sine rettigheter

På oppdrag fra ledelsen ved Nord universitet, har NSD i samråd med prosjektansvarlig og rådgivere ved institusjonen laget utkast til en DPIA som inneholder

- 1) en systematisk beskrivelse av den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger
- 2) vurdering av om behandlingsaktivitetene er nødvendige og står i rimelig forhold til formålene
- 3) analyse av risiko for de registrertes rettigheter og friheter
- 4) planlagte tiltak for å håndtere risikoene

Ved å følge de planlagte tiltakene, mener NSD at personvernrisikoen er redusert i en slik grad at behandlingen kan gjennomføres i samsvar med personvernforordningen, uten forhåndsdrøfting med Datatilsynet.

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon (ved ledelsen) bestemmer om personvernkonsekvensvurderingen er tilfredsstillende utført, og om personvernrisikoen er redusert til et akseptabelt nivå slik at behandlingen kan gjennomføres, eller om det er nødvendig med forhåndsdrøfting. Dette gjøres etter rådføring med institusjonen sitt personvernombud. Vi oversender derfor vår vurdering til oppgitt kontaktperson ved institusjonen. NSD ber om at den godkjente versjonen av DPIA lastes opp til meldeskjema av prosjektansvarlig.

Dersom behandling av personopplysninger igangsettes på grunnlag av DPIA, og deretter endres, minner vi om at endringene kan medføre behov for ny/oppdatert DPIA. Prosjektansvarlig skal melde endringer til NSD, og institusjonen har ansvar for å påse at dette skjer. Ved melding om endringer i prosjektet, vil NSD bistå med denne.

Følgende personer har deltatt i personvernkonsekvensvurderingen:

Navn	Rolle/funksjon	Virksomhet
Ina Nepstad	Seniorrådgiver	NSD
Sigrid Ness	Prosjektansvarlig	Nord Universitet
Øyvind Kvello	Hovedveileder	NTNU
Øyvind Straume	Spesialrådgiver	NSD

1 Systematisk beskrivelse av planlagte behandlingsaktiviteter og formål

Her følger en beskrivelse av den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger, slik den er oppgitt i meldeskjema med vedlegg. Vurdering av behandlingen følger i del 2 og 3.

1.1 Bakgrunn

Prosjektet er vurdert av REK nord i vedtak av 21.01.2020, deres referanse 79104 (se under Tillatelser). REK vurderer at studien framstår som forskning, men ikke som medisinsk eller helsefaglig forskning. Prosjektet er følgelig ikke omfattet av helseforskningslovens saklige virkeområde, jf. helseforskningslovens §§ 2 og 4. Prosjektet vil derfor bli gjennomført og publisert uten godkjenning fra REK.

Det ble søkt om dispensasjon for å benytte journaler fra barnevernet. (prosjektreferanse: 49047). Søknaden om dispensasjon ble avvist av REK nord på sekretariats fullmakt i vedtak av 05.11.2019 med bakgrunn i at REK ikke har hjemmel til å gi dispensasjon for bruk av journaler fra barnevernet.

1.2 Formål

Dette doktorgradsprosjektet har som mål å forstå mer om fenomenet emosjonell vold og hvordan det påvirker barn som vokser opp med emosjonell vold, samt undersøke hvordan emosjonell vold beskrives og oppfattes i kommunale barneverntjenester i Norge. Prosjektet ønsker å utvikle forskningsbasert kunnskap om emosjonell vold for å påvirke praksis og utvikle kunnskap som er

nyttig for yrkesgruppen som deltar i studien, men også for andre mennesker som arbeider nært barn. Forhåpentligvis vil dette prosjektet kunne være av betydning når det gjelder å bidra til tidlig identifikasjon, verne barn, og gi god hjelp til familier for å utvikle et ikke-krenkende samspill.

Forskingsspørsmålene er:

Hvordan beskrives og oppfattes emosjonell vold i barneverntjenestens skriftlige materiale?

Hvordan beskriver og oppfatter ansatte i barneverntjenesten emosjonell vold?

Hvordan beskriver og oppfatter ungdom med egenlevd erfaring emosjonell vold?

1.3 Registrerte

1.3.1 Utvalg 1

Prosjektet vil ta for seg tre forskningsspørsmål (tre utvalg) der deltakerne i Utvalg 1 er barn fra fire kommunale barneverntjenester i Norge (0-18 år) og det vil inkluderes informasjon fra ca 50 journaler.

1.3.2 Utvalg 2

Deltakerne i Utvalg 2 er ansatte i kommunale barneverntjenester. Det vil inkluderes 12-15 ansatte i de fire barneverntjenestene i utvalg 1. Deltakerne rekrutteres via leder og skriftlig informasjon.

1.3.3 Utvalg 3

I Utvalg 3 inkluderes ungdommer og unge voksne (16-23 år). Lederne ved organisasjonene Barnevernsbarna, Mental helse ungdom, Forandringsfabrikken og Barn av rusmisbrukere vil kontaktes med informasjon om studien og en forespørsel om å hjelpe til å rekruttere ungdommer til studien. Det vil rekrutteres mellom 12-15 ungdommer i dette utvalget.

1.3.4 Tredjepersoner

Under intervjuene med utvalg 2 og utvalg 3 kan det potensielt fremkomme opplysninger om personer som selv ikke deltar i prosjektet (heretter kalt **tredjepersoner**). Dette kan være den andre forelderen, søsknen, steforeldre eller andre. Dette er imidlertid ikke noe prosjektleder vil etterspørre i intervjuet, men som kan fremkomme uoppfordret. I oppstart av intervju (og først i intervjuguidene) vil det diskuteres personvern med informanten. Informantene vil bes om å ikke bruke navn når de omtaler tredjepersoner, og å unnlate beskrivelser av tredjepersoner som gjør at det er mulig å identifisere enkelpersoner. Ved journalgjennomgang vil ikke opplysninger om tredjepersoner inkluderes i datamaterialet. Opplysninger om tredjepersoner skal ikke inkluderes i datamaterialet hverken i intervjuer eller journalgjennomgang.

1.4 Datakilder, type og omfang personopplysninger

Som grunnlag for datainnsamlinga vil det først gjennomføres en scoping review av fenomenet emosjonell vold og hvordan dette defineres og beskrives i forskningslitteratur.

1.4.1.1 Dokumentanalyse – forskningsspørsmål 1 (Utvalg 1).

I denne studien vil data genereres gjennom innsamling av skriftlig materiale i barnets journal i kommunal barneverntjeneste. Ved å bruke allerede eksisterende dokumenter kan det gi mulighet til å få informasjon om forhold som er nedskrevet på ulike tidspunkt, på ulike steder og med ulike formål. Gjennom slike dokumenter kan virkeligheten forstås gjennom tekst, man kan se på hvordan tekst former virkelighet og hvordan virkeligheten forstås.

Dokumentanalysen skal undersøke hvordan fenomenet emosjonell beskrives i skriftlig materiale i barnets journal i barneverntjenesten. I tillegg til å undersøke hvilke ord og begreper som blir brukt for å beskrive og tematisere emosjonell vold, vil denne dokumentanalysen også gi deskriptive data som omhandler hvor mange, og hvilke dokumenter som beskriver fenomenet, og hvem det er som tematiserer fenomenet. Datagrunnlaget vil hentes fra fire barneverntjenester fra kommuner med ulik størrelse. Journalene som skal inkluderes skal, i tillegg til dokumentasjon fra barneverntjenesten, inneholde en sakkyndig vurdering etter barnevernloven som ikke er eldre enn fem år. En intern rapport fra psykolog kan erstatte sakkyndig vurdering dersom det ikke foreligger. Alle journaler som møter disse kriteriene, skal leses. Data vil samles inn gjennom å gi skriftlig og muntlig informasjon om studien til lederne for tjenestene slik at prosjektleder får tilgang til materialet.

1.4.1.2 Intervju med ansatte i communal barneverntjeneste – forskningsspørsmål 2 (Utvalg 2).

I denne studien vil ansatte i barneverntjenesten intervjuves individuelt. Kvalitative intervjuer beskrives som en effektiv metode for å utforske menneskers erfaringer med konkrete sosiale fenomener, da de er åpne nok til å utforske informantenes perspektiv, samt detaljerte beskrivelser av disse perspektivene.

Delstudie 2 skal besvare forskningsspørsmål 2. Deltakerne i denne studien vil være ansatte i de barneverntjenestene datagrunnlaget i studie 1 hentes. Fire ansatte fra hver tjeneste. Rekrutteringen gjøres via skriftlig informasjon til lederne for de aktuelle tjenestene, som informerer og drøfter deltakelse med sine ansatte. Dette intervjuet tematiserer emosjonell vold som fenomen, beskrivelser, oppfatninger og erfaringer med emosjonell vold. Prosjektleder gjennomfører

intervjuene. De tas opp på analog lydopptaker eller via diktafon i Nettskjema ved Universitetet i Oslo. Prosjektleader vil selv transkribere intervjuene før analyse. Ved behov for ekstern transkribering skal dette sikres gjennom en databehandleravtale med vedkommende.

1.4.1.3 Kvalitative intervjuer av unge voksne med egenlevd erfaring med emosjonell vold – forskningsspørsmål 3 (Utvalg 3).

Som et annet ledd i datainnsamlinga vil kvalitative dybdeintervjuer benyttes. I dybdeintervjuer studeres meninger, holdninger og erfaringer, slik at verden sett fra informantens ståsted kommer frem. Man ønsker som forsker å forstå informantens livsverden, samt hvordan informanten reflekterer over denne. Intervju gir mulighet til å bli hørt og mulighet til å fremlegge tema og erfaringer som er av betydning for dem i eget liv. Dette gjør intervju spesielt egnet når barn og unge er informanter. Det utarbeides en semistrukturert intervjuguide og prosjektleader vil gjennomføre alle intervjuene. Intervjuene tas opp på analog lydopptaker eller via diktafon i Nettskjema ved Universitetet i Oslo. Prosjektleader vil selv transkribere intervjuene før analyse. Ved behov for ekstern transkribering skal dette sikres gjennom en databehandleravtale med vedkommende.

I denne delstudien er det ønskelig å få innsikt i, og kunnskap om hvordan barn og unges beskriver og oppfatter emosjonell vold. 15 ungdommer tilknyttet organisasjonene Forandringsfabrikken, Landsforeningen for tidligere barnevernsbarn, mental helse ungdom, barn av rusmisbrukere og barn av psykisk syke foreldre deltar i ett dybde-intervju med varighet på omrent en time. Rekrutteringen vil skje via muntlig kontakt med lederne for organisasjonene, samt skriftlig informasjon til lederne og til ungdommer som kan være aktuelle informanter. Alle samtykker til deltakelse vil innhentes etter etiske retningslinjer.

All data i prosjektet klassifiseres som kvalitative data, og prosjektleader skal selv generere, transkribere og analysere datamaterialet i de tre delstudiene. Det kvalitative analyseverktøyet NVIVO benyttes til å operasjonalisere, prosessere og analysere data. I analyse og tolking av datamaterialet vil det hermeneutiske perspektivet benyttes. Braun & Clarkes (2006) tematiske analyse (TA) benyttes for analyse og fremstilling av data. Denne analysemетодen anses som en fleksibel metode for å analysere kvalitative data da den gir mulighet for at man i en slik analyse kan adressere ulike typer kvalitative forskningsspørsmål, vise mønstre i datamaterialet, samt systematisere data på en måte som sikrer at deltakernes utsagn og perspektiv har hovedfokus.

1.5 Kontakt med de registrerte

1.5.1 Utvalg 1

Prosjektet vil ikke være i kontakt med Utvalg 1. Journalgjennomgangen anses som nødvendig for å svare på prosjektets overordnede problemstilling som handler om å forstå emosjonell vold i konteksten kommunal barneverntjeneste. Det er ønskelig å få flere perspektiver inn, både profesjonelle og ungdommer gjennom intervju, men også legge den skriftlige dokumentasjon til grunn for denne forståelsen. Dokumentanalysen undersøker kun barneverntjenestens tematisering og beskrivelser av emosjonell vold i journal, ingen personlige opplysninger om journaleier vil lagres.

Prosjektet vil ha en nettside under Nord universitet hvor informasjon om studiens formål og resultater blir lagt ut. På denne nettsiden vil det også informeres kollektivt om at prosjektet benytter seg av registerdata som dekker den spesifikke populasjonen.

For informasjon og registrertes øvrige rettigheter vises det til punkt 2.3.

1.5.2 Utvalg 2 og 3

For Utvalg 2 og 3 skal det innhentes informert samtykke. Dette innebærer at så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19) og dataportabilitet (art. 20).

1.6 Dataflyt – hvordan personopplysningene behandles

1.6.1 Utvalg 1

Opplysningene om fødselsdato og kjønn registreres av prosjektleder ved journalgjennomgang. Det er tilgang til helseopplysninger i journalene, men disse opplysningene vil ikke lagres.

Journalene gjøres tilgjengelig av den aktuelle barneverntjeneste. Prosjektleder vil ha et møte med kontaktpersonene i barneverntjenestene for å diskutere inklusjonskriteriene til studien før datainnsamling starter. I noen barneverntjenester vil prosjektleder være fysisk tilstede å lese mappene, i papir- eller elektronisk form. I andre tjenester vil prosjektleder få tilgang til mappene via sikker VPN-tilgang via to- og trefaktoridentifikasjon.

Personopplysninger lagres av prosjektleder ved datainnsamling og kodenøkkel etableres. Data med personopplysninger lagres på TSD tilknyttet Universitetet i Oslo i tråd med institusjonens retningslinjer. Kodenøkkel lagres i en sikker mappe. Sikre konfidensialitet, integritet og tilgjengelighet for prosjektleder når nødvendig

1.6.2 Utvalg 2

Navn og e-postadresse gjøres tilgjengelig fra leder ved aktuell tjeneste etter samtykke er hentet inn fra den aktuelle ansatt (de registrerte). Lydfiler fra intervjuet lagres på analog båndopptaker eller via diktafon på Nettskjema tilknyttet universitetet i Oslo. Dette i tråd med institusjonens retningslinjer. Ingen personopplysninger tas opp på lydfil, annet enn informantens stemme.

Personopplysninger gis til prosjektleder over telefon, lagres direkte i forskningsserveren til Nord universitet. Kodenøkkelen etableres og lagres i sikker mappe uavhengig av annet datamateriale. Sikre konfidensialitet, integritet og tilgjengelighet for prosjektleder når nødvendig.

1.6.3 Utvalg 3

Navn, e-postadresse og telefonnummer gjøres tilgjengelig fra leder ved aktuell tjeneste etter samtykke er hentet inn fra den aktuelle ansatt. Lydfiler fra intervjuet lagres på analog båndopptaker eller via diktafon på Nettskjema tilknyttet universitetet i Oslo. Dette i tråd med institusjonens retningslinjer. Lydfiler fra intervjuet lagres på båndopptaker. Ingen personopplysninger tas opp på lydfil, annet enn informantens stemme.

Personopplysninger gis til prosjektleder over telefon, lagres direkte i forskningsserveren til Nord universitet. Kodenøkkelen etableres. Sikre konfidensialitet, integritet og tilgjengelighet for prosjektleder når nødvendig.

Direkte identifiserbare personopplysninger med navn, adresse og eventuelt fødselsdato, lagres i hele prosjektpersonen. Data fra journaler, spørreskjema og intervju vil bli oppbevart i henhold til institusjonens retningslinjer. Data vil lagres henholdsvis på TSD ved Universitetet i Oslo og i sikre mapper ved institusjonen. I den grad opplysninger lagres på minnepinne vil denne være kryptert for at uvedkommende ikke skal få tak i personopplysninger. Stipendiatur/prosjektleder lager en kodenøkkelen av personopplysingene. Denne kodenøkkelen lagres med adgangsbegrensning og med to- og trefaktoridentifikasjon etter institusjonens retningslinjer. Kun stipendiatur vil ha tilgang til kodenøkkelen som forbinder intervjuene til navn. Opplysninger oppbevares for å ha mulighet til å gå tilbake til deltaker ved behov for klargjøring i datamaterialet. Personopplysninger fra ulike datakilder skal ikke kobles, personopplysninger skal heller ikke deles mellom ulike mottakere. Informasjonen pseudonymiseres og behandles med konfidensialitet. All informasjon skal anonymiseres og behandles med konfidensialitet.

Alle personopplysninger behandles pseudonymt ved analysering av data og publisering av data. Alle personopplysninger slettes ett år etter prosjektpersonens slutt.

Resultater fra doktorgradsarbeidet vil bli presentert i et mangfold av formidlingskanaler av både vitenskapelig og populærvitenskapelig art; lokalt, nasjonalt og internasjonalt. I tillegg til minst tre vitenskapelige artikler og doktorgradsavhandling etter standarder beskrevet av Nord universitet, vil erfaring og kunnskap fra prosjektet spres gjennom en rekke andre kanaler. All offentliggjøring forholder seg til deltakernes personvern og det vil ikke være mulig å spore informasjon tilbake til den enkelte deltaker. Det er planlagt poster eller workshop på Nasjonal barnevernkonferanse, Nordic congress on child welfare og Nordisk konferanse om vold og behandling i løpet av stipendiatperioden. I tillegg vil Nord universitet, som en av Norges største utdanningsinstitusjoner for typiske kommunale helse- og velferdsyrker som blant annet barnehagelærere, lærere, sykepleiere, sosionomer, barnevernspedagoger være en viktig formidlingsarena ovenfor kommende yrkesutøvere.

1.7 Tilgang til personopplysninger

I dette prosjektet vil kun prosjektansvarlig ved ansvarlig institusjon ha tilgang til data med personopplysninger. Datadeling skjer kun med anonymiserte data i analysefasen. I datadeling med kompetansegruppen deles ingen personopplysninger annet enn kjønn.

Dersom transkribering blir gjort av andre sikres dette gjennom en databehandleravtale med vedkommende.

1.8 Varighet

Prosjektpersonen er fra 02.09.2019 til 31.12.2023. Etter prosjektschluss vil data bli oppbevart uten personopplysninger (anonymisering), med unntak av Utvalg 3 der alle personopplysninger slettes ett år etter prosjektpersonens slutt.

2 Vurdering av om behandlingsaktivitetene er nødvendige og står i rimelig forhold til formålene

2.1 Rettlig grunnlag

Dette doktorgradsprosjektet har som mål å forstå mer om fenomenet emosjonell vold og hvordan det påvirker barn som vokser opp med emosjonell vold, samt undersøke forståelsen av emosjonell i kommunale barneverntjenester i Norge.

Denne studien har til hensikt å utvikle forskningsbasert kunnskap om emosjonell vold. Gjennom å undersøke hvorvidt det kommer frem informasjon om emosjonell vold i dokumenter fra barneverntjenesten er det ønskelig og påvirke praksis og utvikle handlingsbasert kunnskap som kan

bidra til utvikling av yrkesutøvelsen til aktuelle faggrupper. Kunnskapen som utvikles søkes å være nyttig for både de yrkesgrupper som er blant informantene i studien, men også ytterligere yrkesgrupper som er nærmere barnet og ungdommen i det daglige. Studien vil gi verdifull informasjon om hvordan barn med førstehåndskunnskap beskriver egne erfaringer med å oppleve emosjonell vold i sin oppvekst. Det er ønskelig å gjennom et rikt datamateriale utvikle fenomenets kunnskapsgrunnlag som skal være nyttig yrkesgrupper som er nærmere barnet og ungdommen i det daglige. Gjennom å få en tydeligere forståelse av fenomenet emosjonell vold vil studien være av betydning når det gjelder å bidra til tidlig identifikasjon av barn som opplever emosjonell vold, bidra til å verne barn mot vold og de konsekvensene dette kan gi, og til å gi adekvat hjelp til barna og familien slik at de hjelpes til ikke-krenkende samspill.

1.8.1 Utvalg 1

Prosjektet har potensiell høy samfunnsnytte. En betydelig andel av sakene i barnevernet omhandler bekymring for vold i familien. Når barnevernet skal forholde seg til saker som omhandler vold, beveger de seg i et komplekst og utfordrende fagfelt. Både på grunn av det potensielle alvoret av sakens karakter, og fordi dette kan være en sak som også skal behandles etter straffeloven. Politiet melder om at disse sakene har et høyt og økende omfang og at de er ressurskrevende. Samtidig er henleggelsesprosenten i straffesakene høy. Helsestilsynet (2019) påpeker i sin rapport at barnevernstjenestens handlingsalternativ i disse situasjonene er flytting til beredskapshjem, politianmeldelse av foreldre og tilrettelagt avhør av barnet, og at dette får store konsekvenser for barnet og familien. Mange av barna som blir flyttet akutt etter at de har fortalt om vold, blir også flyttet hjem igjen. I tiden etter intervensjonen kan det skapes uopprettelige relasjonsbrudd mellom barnet og familien når foreldre får kjennskap til hva barnet har fortalt. Fortellingen kan også gi konsekvenser for søsken og dette er et stort ansvar å bære for det barnet som har fortalt. Barna er heller ikke forberedt på konsekvenser av at saken blir anmeldt til politiet. I dag har barnevernet få handlingsalternativ i disse sakene. Helsestilsynet vurderer at det er behov for å se på hvilke handlingsalternativ som er tilgjengelig når barn forteller om vold. På grunn av det økende antall saker, høy henleggelsesprosent og konsekvensene dette kan ha for barnet og familien videre i livet er dette både et stort folkehelse- og samfunnsøkonomisk problem. Det er av stor betydning at barnevernet har oppdatert kunnskap om barn som er utsatt for emosjonell vold og hvordan de kan arbeide med disse familiene på en måte som både ivaretar barnet og som kan bedre situasjonen i hjemmet.

Personvernulempen for de registrerte i utvalg 1 reduseres ved at forsker ikke dokumenterer direkte identifiserende opplysninger i datamaterialet, og at dokumentanalysen kun undersøker

barneverntjenestens tematisering av emosjonell vold i journal, ingen personlige opplysninger om journaleier vil lagres. Videre er det utelukkende stipendiaten som skal ha tilgang til data.

NSD vurderer at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet er nødvendig for å kunne utføre en oppgave i allmennhetens interesse, og at samfunnsnytten klart overstiger personvernulempen for den enkelte.

For alminnelige og særlige kategorier av personopplysninger vil lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen være personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav e), jf. art. 6 nr. 3 bokstav b), jf. art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav i), jf. personopplysningsloven §§ 8 og 9.

Prosjektet er i dialog med Bufdir angående dispensasjon fra taushetsplikten for å benytte journaler fra barnevernet. NSD forutsetter at det foreligger dispensasjon fra taushetsplikten fra Bufdir, med hjemmel i forvaltningsloven § 13 d første ledd, før prosjektet starter.

1.8.2 Utvalg 2 og 3

Prosjektet skal innhente informert samtykke fra utvalg 2 og 3 i prosjektet. I informasjonsskrivet beskrives prosjektets formål og hva deltakelse innebærer. Videre vektlegges det at deltakelse er frivillig og det opplyses om hvordan de registrerte kan benytte seg av sine rettigheter. Prosjektet har gjennomført særlige tiltak for å forsikre seg at de registrerte forstår konsekvensene av samtykket og kan gi et utvetydig bekreftelse som den enkelte kan trekke tilbake. Samtykket fra de registrerte dokumenteres gjennom signatur på samtykkeskjema.

Det er NSD sin vurdering at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 nr. 11 og art. 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse, som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake. Lovlig grunnlag for utvalg 2 og 3 vil dermed være den registrertes uttrykkelige samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a, jf. art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a, jf. personopplysningsloven § 10, jf. § 9 (2).

2.2 Sentrale prinsipper

2.2.1 Formålsbegrensning

Prosjektet ønsker å utvikle forskningsbasert kunnskap om emosjonell vold for å påvirke praksis og utvikle kunnskap som er nyttig for yrkesgruppen som deltar i studien, men også for andre mennesker som arbeider nært barn. Når barnevernet skal forholde seg til dette, beveger de seg i et komplekst fagfelt. Både på grunn av det potensielle alvoret i saken, og fordi dette kan være en sak som også skal behandles etter straffeloven. Forhåpentligvis vil dette prosjektet kunne være av betydning når det gjelder å bidra til tidlig identifikasjon, verne barn, og gi god hjelp til familier for å utvikle et ikke-krenkende samspill.

Forskningsspørsmålene er:

- På hvilken måte kommer informasjon om emosjonell vold frem i barneverntjenestens skriftlige materiale?
- Hvordan beskriver og forstår ansatte i barneverntjenesten emosjonell vold?
- Hvordan beskriver, forstår og håndtere barn og ungdom å bli utsatt for emosjonell vold?

NSD vurderer at formålet slik det er angitt over til å være spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede. Personopplysninger skal ikke viderebehandles til nye/andre formål som vurderes å være uforenelige med det opprinnelige forskningsformålet.

2.2.2 Dataminimering

Forsker begrunner behovet for datamaterialet på følgende måte: Hensikten med prosjektet er å forstå hvordan emosjonell vold beskrives og oppfattes. For å kunne beskrive dette godt nok er det nødvendig å hente inn data av ulik karakter, og med flere perspektiver. Derav behovet for å både utforske skriftlig materiale og i intervju med profesjonelle og mennesker med egenlevd erfaring.

Journalgjennomgangen for Utvalg 1 anses som nødvendig for å svare på prosjektets overordnede problemstilling som handler om å forstå emosjonell vold i konteksten communal barneverntjeneste. I journalgjennomgang er hensikten å hente ut informasjon om hvordan fenomenet omtales og beskrives i ulike dokumenter og journalnotat. Her vil det telles ord og dokumenter som er relevante, samt skrives ned hvilke ord og begreper som brukes for å beskrive temaet. Det vil noteres hvilke faggrupper som har samarbeidet med familien. Personopplysningene er nødvendig for å kunne differensiere mellom utsatthet i alder og kjønn. De er også nødvendige for å kunne gå tilbake i datamaterialet ved behov i prosjektperioden.

NSD vurderer at personopplysningene som behandles er adekvate, relevante, nødvendige og begrenset til det som er nødvendig for formålet.

2.2.3 Riktighet

Opplysningene som behandler vil i all hovedsak være basert på de registrertes egen opplevelse, oppfattelse og følelser knyttet til bestemte hendelser. Det vil derfor være umulig for forsker å kunne kontrollere riktighetene i disse opplysningene, men man må anta at opplysningene er korrekte.

Fra saksmappene i barnevernet innhentes det opplysninger som er registrert i vedkommendes journal. Det er liten grunn til å tro at det foreligger feilaktige opplysninger i datamaterialet. Det foreligger dermed ikke et særlig behov for kontradiksjon.

2.2.4 Lagringsbegrensning

Prosjektet går fra 02.09.2019 til 31.12.2023. NSD vurderer at tidsperioden er begrenset til det som er nødvendig for å gjennomføre prosjektet.

Ved prosjektets slutt skal alle personidentifiserbare opplysninger slettes. Lydfiler slettes, mens avidentifiserte transkripsjoner fra intervjuer, journaler og spørreskjema beholdes til alle relevante analyser med tanke på publikasjoner er avsluttet. Alt materiale lagres på forskningsserver til Nord universitet.

2.2.5 Personopplysingssikkerhet

Personopplysningene behandles av et begrenset antall personer, og oppbevares sikkert ved institusjonen.

NSD vurderer at de tekniske og organisatoriske tiltakene beskrevet i del 1 gir tilstrekkelig vern mot uautorisert/ulovlig behandling av personopplysninger samt utilsiktet tap/ødeleggelse/skade av personopplysninger.

2.3 De registrertes rettigheter og friheter

1.8.3 Utvalg 1

Det skal ikke gis informasjon til de registrerte i utvalg 1 om behandlingen av deres personopplysninger. Fokuset for nedtegnelsene fra journaldokumenter vil være på barnevernets historier og arbeidsmåter, og ikke på den enkelte familie sin historie. Det skal ikke innhentes direkte identifiserende opplysninger om personene som nevnes i barnevernsjournalene eller deres kontaktopplysninger. Det vil kreve stor innsats å få tak i nødvendig informasjon om den enkelte journaleier, for å kunne gi informasjon om prosjektet. Dette på grunn av omfanget av journaler

som skal inkluderes i utvalget som er på 50 journaler. I tillegg vurderes det at informasjon om prosjektet kan føre til unødvendig uro og usikkerhet med tanke på fokuset i datainnsamling og dataanalyse, og at dette er hovedsakelig på barneverntjenestens arbeid og ikke på personlige opplysninger om journaleier. Basert på en avveining mellom tiltakene som kreves for å informere og ulempen for den enkelte registrerte, vurderes det at det kan unntas fra informasjonsplikten på grunnlag av at det vil kreve en uforholdsmessig stor innsats, jf. personvernforordningen art. 14 nr. 5 bokstav b.

Det skal gis offentlig informasjon om behandlingen av personopplysninger på Nord universitet sine nettsider. Denne informasjonen skal følge kravene i art. 14 i personvernforordningen.

De registrertes øvrige rettigheter gjelder like fullt. De registrerte har dermed rett til innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19) og protest (art. 21).

Rettighetene gjelder bare for de registrerte som sikkert kan finnes igjen i datamaterialet. Dersom enkeltpersoner ikke kan finnes igjen i datamaterialet bortfaller også rettighetene.

Dersom en enkeltperson tar kontakt for å benytte seg av sine rettigheter, blir første steg å undersøke hvorvidt vedkommende sikkert kan identifiseres i datamateriale. Hvis behandlingsansvarlig institusjon ikke kan identifisere vedkommende kan ikke vedkommende benytte seg av sine rettigheter. Dersom vedkommende kan identifiseres kan vedkommende benytte seg av sine rettigheter. Prosjektansvarlig kan i slike tilfeller få assistanse fra institusjonens personvernombud.

1.8.4 Utvalg 2 og 3

De registrerte vil ha følgende rettigheter i prosjektet: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20). Disse rettighetene gjelder så lenge enkeltpersoner sikkert kan identifiseres i datamaterialet.

NSD vurderer at informasjonen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

NSD minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

1.8.5 Tredjepersoner

Det vil kunne fremkomme opplysninger om tredjepersoner. I oppstart av intervju (og først i intervjuguidene) vil det diskuteres personvern med informanten. Informantene vil bli bedt om å ikke bruke navn når de omtaler tredjepersoner, og å unnlate beskrivelser av tredjepersoner som

gjør at det er mulig å identifisere enkeltpersoner. Ved journalgjennomgang vil ikke opplysninger om tredjepersoner inkluderes i datamaterialet. Opplysninger om tredjepersoner skal ikke inkluderes i datamaterialet hverken i intervjuer eller journalgjennomgang. Prosjektleder vil ikke tilgang til kontaktinformasjonen til tredjeperson og har derfor ikke mulighet til å gi direkte informasjon. NSD konkluderer med at det vil innebære en uforholdsmessig stor innsats å gi informasjonen. På bakgrunn av dette kan det unntas fra informasjonsplikten overfor tredjeperson på grunnlag av at det vil kreve en uforholdsmessig stor innsats, jf. personvernforordningen art. 14 nr. 5 bokstav b.

De registrertes øvrige rettigheter gjelder like fullt. De registrerte har dermed rett til innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19) og protest (art. 21).

Rettighetene gjelder bare for de registrerte som sikkert kan finnes igjen i datamaterialet. Dersom enkeltpersoner ikke kan finnes igjen i datamaterialet bortfaller også rettighetene.

3 Vurdering av risiko for de registrertes rettigheter og friheter

3.1 Risikovurdering av personvernet

NSD vil trekke frem konkrete risikoer i prosjektet:

- Prosjektet lagrer direkte identifiserende opplysninger i prosjektperioden
- Prosjektet behandler særlege kategorier av personopplysninger og opplysninger av svært personlig karakter
- Det innhentes opplysninger om en sårbar gruppe
- Deler av personopplysningene behandles uten at det gis informasjon eller innhentes samtykke fra de registrerte. Dette utfordrer deres mulighet til ha reell bestemmelse over sine personopplysninger og det utfordrer prinsippet om åpenhet.

4 Planlagte tiltak for å håndtere risikoene

4.1 Tiltak

Følgende tiltak er gjort for å redusere personvernrisikoen i prosjektet:

- Det er kun prosjektleder/stipendiaten som skal ha tilgang til datamaterialet som behandles i dette prosjektet
- Det skal ikke behandles direkte identifiserende opplysninger om det utvalget som ikke informeres om behandlingen
- Det gis informasjon og innhentes samtykke fra de som selv deltar direkte i prosjektet
- Det skal publiseres informasjon om prosjektet på egne nettsider

5 NSD sin samlede vurdering av personvernet

NSD vurderer på grunnlag av ovennevnte tiltak at prosjektet håndterer de identifiserte risikoene på en akseptabel måte, og at personvernet således er tilstrekkelig ivaretatt. NSD legger spesielt vekt på at personvernulempen reduseres ved at det kun er en person som skal ha tilgang til data og at det kun skal behandles indirekte identifiserende opplysninger om de som ikke informeres om behandlingen. Videre har vi vektlagt at samfunnensnytt med prosjektet er stor.

6 Personvernombudet

Personvernombudet ved Nord universitet har gjennomgått personvernkonsekvensvurderingen, og stiller seg bak NSDs konklusjon.

Det bemerkes at man ikke har en egen forskningsserver til Nord universitet. Data som ifølge prosjektansvarliges beskrivelse ikke skal lagres i TSD, skal lagres i Onedrive som prosjektansvarlig har tilgang til gjennom pålogging med FEIDE. Personvernombudet vurderer disse dataene til å være rød/fortrolig i henhold til institusjonens retningslinjer for klassifisering av informasjon. For å øke sikkerheten for røde data lagret i Onedrive, skal data lagres i egne mapper som er sperret for deling. IT-hjelp bistår med dette. De nevnte sikkerhetstiltak er i henhold til IT-avdelingens anbefalinger ved behandling av sensitive data i forskningsprosjekter.

7 Godkjenning fra institusjonens ledelse

Nord universitet v/dekan ved fakultet for Lærerutdanning, kunst og kulturfag har gjennomgått personvernkonsekvensvurderingen. Det godkjennes at forskningsprosjektet gjennomføres som beskrevet med de sikkerhetstiltak personvernombudet påpeker.

Sted/dato

Lerøyen 10.12.20

Signatur

Egil Solli-

Articles

1. Ness, S. (2022). A narrow focus in research on emotional abuse. A scoping review of definitions and descriptions on emotional abuse in research on child welfare and social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12967>
2. Ness, S. (2023). 'It's not like we use the word emotional abuse.' A study of how Norwegian child welfare workers describe and understand emotional abuse of children. *Child abuse & Neglect* 146.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chabu.2023.106504>
3. Ness, S. & Paulsen, V. Emotional abuse, an invisible aspect in Norwegian child welfare documentation. *Under review for publication*.

Ness, S. (2022). A narrow focus in research on emotional abuse. A scoping review of definitions and descriptions on emotional abuse in research on child welfare and social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12967>

A narrow focus in research on emotional abuse: A scoping review of definitions and descriptions on emotional abuse in research on child welfare and social work

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Abstract

Previous research argues that emotional abuse (EA) is not as well understood as other forms of abuse and that it poses a challenge to professionals concerned with the well-being of children. The aim of this scoping review is to explore how EA is defined and described in peer-reviewed studies in the context of child welfare and social work. The electronic databases PsycINFO, Web of Science, Social services abstract, Scopus and Medline were searched to identify studies. Twenty-six recently published studies that provided a sufficient definition or description of EA were included in the review. Findings were analysed using thematic synthesis. The results indicate a varying and somewhat inconsistent terminology when labelling EA and that definitions and descriptions of EA mainly are gathered from quantitative research. Moreover, the results reveal a lack of research from the perspective of children and youth in contact with CWS and from child welfare workers. Such research may expand current knowledge of the definitions and descriptions on EA by providing a more nuanced understanding of how children and youth experience EA, and elaborate on their susceptibility and resilience in relation to their experiences of EA.

KEY WORDS

child protection, child welfare, emotional abuse, emotional maltreatment, social work

1 | INTRODUCTION

Emotional maltreatment (EMT) is a serious and frequent form of maltreatment experienced by children and adolescents (Baker et al., 2021). It is regarded an essential factor underlying other forms of maltreatment, and it is as harmful as other forms for maltreatment (e.g., Schaefer et al., 2018; Vachon et al., 2015). EMT is further likely to have long-lasting and wide-ranging impact on the well-being, health and emotional and behavioural development of children and youth (e.g., Brassard, 2019; Felitti et al., 1998; Spinazzola et al., 2014). The global prevalence rates of EMT are high, but vary tremendously (White et al., 2016). These variations partly rely upon the challenges

of defining, detecting and distinguishing EMT from inadequate parenting behaviours (Lavi et al., 2019; Malo et al., 2017; Ottosen et al., 2020).

Most definitions in the literature differentiate EMT into two subtypes: emotional abuse (EA) and emotional neglect (EN) (Glaser, 2002; Hart et al., 2011). Even though EA and EN have similar characteristics, previous research reveals a need to unpack the multidimensional concept of EMT to understand and assess these subtypes separately (English et al., 2015; Trickett et al., 2009; White et al., 2016). This has the potential to develop an expanded understanding, a more nuanced framework, increased detection and better knowledge of the implications for children and families (Lavi et al., 2019). Paradoxically, little

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research has been conducted with the aim of revealing a more in-depth picture of the definitions and descriptions of EA and EN (English et al., 2015; Lavi et al., 2019).

Previous research argue that EA is not as well understood as other forms of abuse and that there is a lack of consensus on definitions on EA (Baker et al., 2021; Malo et al., 2017; Yoon et al., 2019). Trickett et al. (2009) argues that this has two main reasons. First, it has been particularly difficult to reach consensus about the definition and operationalization of EA. Second, EA often overlaps with other types of child maltreatment, which makes it especially difficult to understand the special impact of EA (Trickett et al., 2009). EA is mainly understood as a pattern of inadequate parenting that potentially harm the child. Caregiver behaviour that could be considered EA if severe and frequent is, however, common and widely accepted parenting practice (Baker et al., 2021). Thus, it is challenging for professionals to address EA clearly to caregivers as it is closer to normative parental behaviour than other forms of abuse (North, 2022). Additionally, previous research argue that EA is defined in different ways both between and within countries, cultures and professions (Kloppen et al., 2015; North, 2022).

According to the difficulties of defining EA, and the need to understand it as a separate construct, the aim of the current study is to explore how EA is defined and described in research on child welfare and social work. The aim of this study is not to reach definitive conclusions on EA, but rather to review the diversity of definitions and descriptions available in research in the mentioned context. The study is part of a more comprehensive PhD Project with the overall aim of exploring how EA is conceptualized in the context of child welfare. Thus, the reviewed literature is limited to this context.

2 | METHODS AND ANALYSIS

This scoping review aims to explore the diversity of definitions and descriptions of EA by identifying and exploring these in research on child welfare and social work. A scoping review was considered the most suitable approach because this method provides an overview of

TABLE 1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the 'population-concept-context (PCC)' framework

PCC	Description
P – Population	Children and youth/young adults (0–25).
C – Concept	The peer-reviewed articles should be from a child welfare or social work context, and include a sufficient definition or description of the concept EA when screened for full-text inclusion.
C – Context	Articles of any methods, review articles and conceptual articles in English language in the period 2015–2021. Research articles were geographical limited to developed countries (and regions) including the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, continental Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

a broad and complex topic (Munn et al., 2018). This scoping review was based on preceding work by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and Levac et al. (2010). Throughout the review process, The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA ScR): Checklist and Explanation was used (Tricco et al., 2018) (Appendix A). The scoping review process involved the following five steps: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting the studies, (4) charting the data and (5) collating, summarizing and reporting the results. In the following sections, these stages are described in further detail.

2.1 | Research question and search strategy

In line with the aim of the study, the following research question was formulated: *How is emotional abuse defined and described in research on child welfare and social work?* The search strategy was underpinned by key inclusion criteria based on the 'population-concept-context (PCC)' framework recommended by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) for scoping reviews (2015) (Table 1).

The final structured literature search was conducted on 8th of December 2021, with the assistance of a research librarian. Five electronic databases were searched: PsycINFO, Web of Science, Social services abstract, Scopus and Medline. These databases were selected to be comprehensive and cover a broad range of disciplines. The search was designed to identify articles including the concept 'emotional abuse' or overlapping concepts as 'psychological abuse' and 'emotional maltreatment', to account for terminological commonalities. One of these concepts should appear in the search in combination with the concept 'child welfare', 'child protection' or 'social work'. A sufficient description or definition of EA should be offered when studies were screened for full-text inclusion. The keywords and subject heading used to search these databases are listed in Table 2.

The scoping review included literature reviews and conceptual and empirical studies to identify as many definitions and descriptions as possible. To allow replicability of the review, the search was limited to English contributions published in peer-reviewed journals. The search was also limited to the period 2015–2021 to review recent literature. Geographically, the review was limited to developed countries (and regions), including the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, European countries and New Zealand. The geographical limitations were applied when screening title, abstract

TABLE 2 Search strategy for the scoping review

Keywords, search terms
Emotional abuse* OR emotional maltreat* OR emotional violence* OR psychological abuse* OR psychological maltreat* OR psychological violence*
AND
Child welfare OR child protect* OR social work

and full-text. Full search strategy for the different databases is provided in the [Appendix B](#).

2.2 | Study selection

The results of the literature search were imported to EndNote X9 for Windows and further into the [Covidence.org](#) program to support the reliability of the study selection and to manage the search process. Across the five databases, the literature searches identified a total of 825 potential studies. This resulted in 482 studies once they were screened for duplicates. Additionally six studies from the initial search of this review were included to full-text screening. Twenty-six records were included in the final review (Figure 1).

In the study selection, the author screened title and abstract for eligibility based on a priori inclusion criteria, as shown in Table 1. When uncertainty arose when screening for title, abstract and full-text, this was discussed with supervisors of the PhD project. Uncertainty about full-texts was also reviewed by one of the supervisors. Discrepancies were resolved by discussion among the author and supervisor until consensus on inclusion or exclusion was reached. Reasons for exclusion were: not sufficient definition or description of emotional abuse (40), wrong population (9), not peer-reviewed article

(5), wrong study context (5), not English language (3), wrong geographical context (3) and duplicate (1).

2.3 | Data extraction, collating, summarizing and reporting the results

Data were extracted from the included studies using a data charting form, adapted from JBI Methodology for Scoping Reviews (2015). The following information from each study were extracted, first by the author and discussed with supervisors; author(s); year of publication; origin/country of origin (where the study was published or conducted); aims/purpose of the study; methodology, study population, sample size (if applicable); and main findings of relevance for the research question. As the aim was to explore definitions and descriptions of EA, but not to focus on the results of the reviewed studies, the definitions and descriptions were mainly gathered from the introduction, theoretical background or methods sections of the included studies.

To analyse the included studies, the thematic synthesis approach was applied (Thomas & Harden, 2008). First, patterns were identified by repeatedly reading and getting familiar with the data, before the data were systematically coded 'line by line'. Second, data with similar

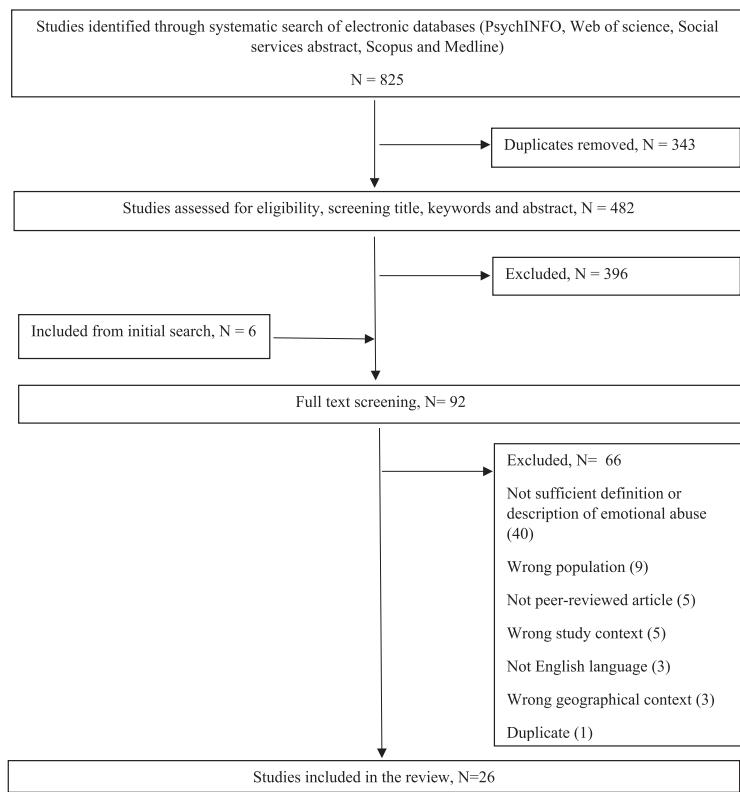


FIGURE 1 Identification and selection of studies

TABLE 3 Overview of main themes of the included studies

References	Various ways of labelling EA	Definitions on EA	Descriptions on EA
Auslander et al. (2016)	•		•
Brassard et al. (2020)	•	•	•
Brown et al. (2019)	•		•
Bunting et al. (2018)	•	•	
Cohen and Thakur (2021)	•		•
Ellenbogen et al. (2015)	•		•
English et al. (2015)	•	•	•
Galitto et al. (2017)	•		•
Kim et al. (2017)	•	•	•
Kloppen et al. (2015)	•	•	•
Kobulsky et al. (2018)	•		•
Kobulsky et al. (2021)	•		•
Lavi et al. (2019)	•	•	•
Lewis et al. (2019)	•		•
Liu and Vaughn (2019)	•	•	
Naughton et al. (2017)	•	•	•
North (2019)	•	•	
North (2022)	•		•
Osborne et al. (2022)	•		•
Paul and Eckenrode (2015)	•		•
Silva and Calheiros (2020)	•	•	
Vahl et al. (2016)	•	•	•
Villodas et al. (2021)	•		•
White et al. (2016)	•	•	•
Yoon (2017)	•		•
Yoon et al. (2019)	•		•

Abbreviation: EA, emotional abuse.

traits were organized in *descriptive themes*, which remained close to the primary studies. Third, themes were generated and continuously adjusted and (re)considered in to *analytical themes* aiming to generate new insights to respond to the research question. The analytical process was recursive, moving back and forth between the three phases, and where data related to the analytical themes were repeatedly reread and reconsidered to determine whether the data really supported them (Thomas & Harden, 2008). After reviewing, adjusting and discussing the themes with supervisors throughout the analytical process, the findings were organized into the following three analytical themes: (1) various ways of labelling EA, (2) definitions on EA, and (3) descriptions on EA. The themes are not mutually exclusive, as some studies included more than one way of labelling, defining or describing EA. This is presented in Table 3.

3 | RESULTS

The results of this scoping review are organized according to the main analytical themes that were generated in the analysis. Before

returning to these themes, information about the volume, nature and characteristics of the included studies are summarized.

3.1 | The volume, nature and characteristics of the included studies

Altogether, 26 studies were included in the review. Among these studies, 17 were conducted in the United States, four in the United Kingdom, two in Canada, one in Belgium, one in Portugal and one in Norway. Fifteen journals were included in the material, and the articles were published between 2015 and 2021. Nineteen of the included studies had a quantitative design, and 15 of these draw on data from longitudinal studies with a multi-informant design. Additionally, two studies were quantitative self-report studies, one was a quantitative study drawing on national administrative data, and one was a longitudinal study. Five of the included studies were reviews of literature or document analysis, and two studies had a qualitative design drawing on professionals' subjectivity and reflexivity when intervening with EA. More sufficient information of the characteristics of the included studies are provided in Appendix C.

3.2 | Various ways of labelling EA

All 26 of the included studies are naturally represented in the first theme as it focus on the various ways of labelling EA. The analysis indicates that EA is labelled in interchangeable ways and that several terms are used both as synonyms and complementary terms too EA. This is shown in Table 4.

The analysis reveals that 13 of the included studies use only one term in their studies: EA or psychological abuse. The remaining 13 studies use various terms to label EA throughout their studies. The analysis shows that five studies point out abuse and maltreatment as synonyms or overlapping terms in previous research (Brassard et al., 2020; English et al., 2015; Lavi et al., 2019; Paul & Eckenrode, 2015). Six studies label EA as an element of EMT (English et al., 2015; Naughton et al., 2017; North, 2022; Paul & Eckenrode, 2015; Vahl et al., 2016; White et al., 2016). Further, three

studies use the terms omission and commission to label EN (omission) and EA (commission) (English et al., 2015; Paul & Eckenrode, 2015; White et al., 2016).

The analysis further indicates that the use of emotional and psychological are a matter of convention (English et al., 2015). Two studies argue that maltreatment is an overall and preferred term as it includes both emotional abuse and emotional neglect as two subtypes (English et al., 2015; White et al., 2016). The analysis indicates that how EA is labelled differs according to location and context. English et al. (2015) argue that emotional maltreatment is the most common used term in the American research community. North (2022:2), however, states that 'In US, the term psychological maltreatment is used, because it subsumes all of the affective and cognitive aspects of child abuse'. Further, North (2022, p. 2) states that 'English social workers use the term emotional abuse to encapsulate all of the abusive and neglectful aspects of harm'.

TABLE 4 Terms used when labelling emotional abuse in the reviewed literature

References	Emotional abuse	Psychological abuse	Mental abuse	Verbal abuse	Emotional maltreatment	Psychological maltreatment	Mental violence	Commission
Auslander et al. (2016)	✓							
Brassard et al. (2020)	•	•	•	•	•	✓	•	
Brown et al. (2019)	✓					•		
Bunting et al. (2018)	✓							
Cohen and Thakur (2021)	✓							
Ellenbogen et al. (2015)	✓	•						
English et al. (2015)	•	•		•	✓	•		•
Galitto et al. (2017)					✓			
Kim et al. (2017)	✓							
Kloppen et al. (2015)	✓	✓			•			
Kobulsky et al. (2018)	✓							
Kobulsky et al. (2021)	✓							
Lavi et al. (2019)	•	•						
Lewis et al. (2019)	✓							
Liu and Vaughn (2019)	✓							
Naughton et al. (2017)	•	•				•		
North (2019)	✓							
North (2022)	✓				•			
Osborne et al. (2022)	✓							
Paul and Eckenrode (2015)	•	•			•	✓		•
Silva and Calheiros (2020)		✓						
Vahl et al. (2016)	•				✓			
Villodas et al. (2021)		✓						
White et al. (2016)	•				✓			•
Yoon (2017)	✓							
Yoon et al. (2019)	✓					•		

Note: ✓ represents the main term related to emotional abuse used in the study. • represents terms used as synonyms or complementary terms to emotional abuse.

3.3 | Definitions of EA

The second theme focuses on the definitions of EA provided in the reviewed literature. As shown, the analysis indicates that EA is counted both as an element of EMT, as a synonym to EMT, and as a unique concept. According to this, definitions on EMT in the reviewed literature are also included in this theme. Four studies include a definition of EMT (Brassard et al., 2020; English et al., 2015; Lavi et al., 2019; White et al., 2016), and seven studies provide a definition on EA (Bunting et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2017; Kloppen et al., 2015; Liu & Vaughn, 2019; Naughton et al., 2017; Silva & Calheiros, 2020; Vahl et al., 2016).

In the analysis, four definitions of EMT reveal. These definitions are mainly characterized by focusing on EMT as a pattern of caregiver behaviour that have potential harm for children's emotional and psychological health and development. First, Brassard et al. (2020, p. 3) refer to the definition endorsed by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) and defines psychological maltreatment as a

repeated pattern or extreme incident(s) of caretaker behavior that thwart the child's basic psychological development needs (e.g., safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, respect) and convey that the child is worthless, defective, damaged, unloved, unwanted, endangered, primarily useful in meeting another's needs, and/or expendable.

Second, two studies refer to the following definition of EMT

repeated pattern of behavior that conveys to children that they are worthless, unloved, unwanted, only in value in meeting another's needs, or seriously threatened with physical or psychological violence (English et al., 2015, p. 53; White et al., 2016, p. 111).

Third, the same two studies also define EMT as

psychological tactics aimed at undermining emotional security and sense of self that includes guilt induction, and exertion of power through psychologically coercive means (English et al., 2015, p. 53; White et al., 2016, p. 111).

Last, Lavi et al. (2019) define EMT to be a characteristic of the parent-child relationship, rather than an isolated event or events. They further define EMT as interactions that are actually harmful or have the potential to harm children's psychological or emotional health and development.

The analysis discloses four definitions on EA. In line with the definitions of EMT, these definitions also focus on the concept of the phenomenon and the potential harm for the children. Both

Kloppen et al. (2015) and Naughton et al. (2017) draw on the definition from World Health Organization (2002), which define EA as follows:

Emotional and psychological abuse involves both isolated incidents, as well as a pattern of failure over time on the part of a parent or caregiver to provide a developmentally appropriate and supportive environment (as cited in Kloppen et al., 2015, p. 52).

This definition accounts for that both isolated incidents and patterns may cause harm to the children and youth experiencing EA. The definition included by Bunting et al. (2018, p. 1157) also emphasizes the pattern or persistence in EA in which cause adverse consequences for the children, when defining it as

the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development.

Liu and Vaughn (2019, p. 219) define emotional abuse as

acts that one intentionally commits to cause emotional and verbal abuse, confinement, and other types of abuse that deprive the child of food and shelter.

This definition do not differ between incidents and patterns, and it also differ from the others definitions by stating that the acts are intentional, which is not included in the other definitions. Lastly, Silva and Calheiros (2020, p. 5) further define EA as

verbal interactions that offend and denigrate the child, with the potential to disrupt psychological attributes, such as self-esteem.

Summarized, the findings show that the definitions of EMT and EA have some variations, but that they represent commonalities when focusing on caregiver behaviour that have potential to harm children's emotional and psychological development.

3.4 | Descriptions of EA

The third theme is closely connected to the second, as it focuses on the descriptions of EA. Descriptions of both EMT and EA are included in the analysis, due to the overlap in the use of terms. Nine studies include descriptions on EMT, and eight studies provide descriptions on EA. Further 13 studies include item-levels descriptions of EA from measuring instruments.

From the nine studies that describe EMT, two main ways reveal in the analysis. First, EMT is described by adopting the standard of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (Brassard et al., 2020; Lavi et al., 2019; Naughton et al., 2017; North, 2022;

TABLE 5 Two main ways of operationalizing emotional maltreatment in the reviewed literature

AP SAC	MCS/MMCS
Spurning- verbal and nonverbal caregiver acts of hostile rejection that degrade a child	Failure to support psychological safety and security; discipline through intimidation, nonviolent material conflict, threat of injury, exposure to extreme behaviours, threatens suicide, extreme material violence, blames for suicide or death of family member, suicidal attempt, homicidal threat, abandonment.
Terrorizing – caregiver behaviour that threatens or is likely to physically hurt, kill abandon, or place the child or child's loved ones/objects in recognizably dangerous or frightening situations	Failure to support acceptance and self-esteem – undermines relationships, ridicules child, ignores child, rejection/inattentive to child, blames for marital or family problems, inappropriate expectations, derogatory names, negativity/hostility.
Exploiting/corrupting – caregiver acts that meet their own needs to the detriment of the child and encourage the child to develop inappropriate behaviours	Failure to allow age-appropriate – age-appropriate autonomy, inappropriate responsibility, prohibits age-appropriate socialization, places child in role-reversal, thwarts child's development.
Isolating – caregiver acts that consistently and unreasonably deny the child opportunities for interacting and communication with peers or adults inside or outside the home	Restriction – binding, confinement/isolation, uses restrictive methods for less than 2 h, extremely restrictive methods for more than 2 h close confinement.
Emotional unresponsiveness – caregiver behaviour that ignores the child's attempts and needs to interact	
Mental health, educational or medical neglect – caregiver act that ignore, refuse to allow, or fail to provide the necessary treatment for the mental health, medical, and educational problems or needs for the child.	

Paul & Eckenrode, 2015). Second, by EMT is described by implementing the (Modified) Maltreatment Classification Scale (MCS/MMCS) (English et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2019; White et al., 2016). A description of the parental or caregiver behaviour that establishes EMT in these descriptions is referred to in Table 5.

The analysis exposes that the reviewed studies provide scarce clarification on which categories or subtypes in APSAC and MSC/MMSC characterize EA and EN. One study differ between these concepts as follows:

Emotional neglect concerns parental/caretaker's failure to provide significant warmth, support, emotional stimulation, and/or attunement to the child, whereas emotional abuse refers to parental/caretaker's criticism, rejection, devaluation, or humiliation (Vahl et al., 2016, p. 143).

Further two studies provide descriptions on indicators of EA in MCS/MMCS (Kim et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2019). Kim et al. (2017, p. 493) describe these to be

spurning (child is blamed for adult problems and verbal abuse), terrorizing (parent threatens suicide, child subjected to extreme negativity or hostility), isolating (parent interferes with other relationships and child is confined or isolated) and exploiting/corrupting (child is forced to assume inappropriate responsibility, child involved in illegal activity).

This connects to the APSAC standard on EMT. According to Kim et al. (2017), the four first categories in the description of EMT establish characteristics of EA. Lewis et al. (2019), however, describe indicators of EA to be caregiver rejection or inattention of children's need for affection and positive regard, caregiver undermines child's

relationships with other adults significant to the child, caregiver belittles or ridicules the child and caregiver demonstrates pattern of negativity or hostility toward the child. This relates to the subtypes of MCS/MMCS, but the analysis discloses that it is unclear how these indicators establish EA within the description of EMT.

The analysis further reveals that eight studies include descriptions of EA. North (2019) describes EA as a complex concept, which includes cumulative elements. One element may be restricting a child's psychological autonomy. Both Kloppen et al. (2015) and Naughton et al. (2017) draw on the definition from WHO (2002) when describing emotional abuse to include

the restriction of movement; patterns of belittling, blaming, threatening, frightening, discriminating against or ridiculing; and other non-physical forms of rejection or hostile treatment (Kloppen et al., 2015, p. 52).

EA is further described as acts that include

restricting a child's movements, denigration, ridicule, threats and intimidation, discrimination, rejection and other non-physical forms of hostile treatment (Naughton et al., 2017, p. 352).

English et al. (2015) and White et al. (2016) describe EA as an excessive, continuing criticism, denigration, terrorizing, repeated blaming insults or threats. Villodas et al. (2021) describes EA as 'threats of harm', and Brown et al. (2019) describe it as 'threatening or namecalling'. These descriptions all include caregiver behaviour that may be elements of EA. Silva and Calheiros (2020), additionally, focus on the potential harm for the child when referring to psychological abuse as actions, coercive, punitive disciplinary methods, verbal interactions that offend and denigrate the child, with the potential to disrupt psychological attributes, such as self-esteem.

The analysis shows that item-levels descriptions of EA are provided in different measuring instruments. These instruments are reported on by youth, caregivers and/or caseworkers. The analysis further reveals that eight studies provide descriptions on caregiver behaviour that establish EA (Brassard et al., 2020; Cohen & Thakur, 2021; Kobulsky et al., 2021; Lavi et al., 2019; Osborne et al., 2022; Paul & Eckenrode; Yoon, 2017; Yoon et al., 2019). These example items are gathered from examples of self-reports:

when I was growing up, people in my family called me things like stupid, ugly or lazy,

people in my family said hurtful things to me,

how often did a parent, stepparent or adult in the home swear at you, insult you, or put you down,

caregiver shouted, yelled or screamed at you,

caregiver said you would be sent away or kicked out of the house,

have any of your parent ever blamed you for other people's problems when they were not your fault?,

have any of your parents threatened to hurt you badly?

In caregiver report, example items are

you called you child dumb, lazy or some other name like that,

you swore or cursed at your child.

Further, the analysis shows that five studies include item-levels descriptions focussing on children's or youths feelings of experiencing EA from their caregiver (Auslander et al., 2016; Ellenbogen et al., 2015; Galitto, 2017; Kobulsky et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2019). These descriptions include

people in my family said hurtful things to me,

I felt that someone in my family hated me,

someone in my family hated me,

my parents wished I had never been born,

made you feel unloved, threatened to abandon, and had really serious fight with another family member,

have any of your parents ever humiliated you very badly by putting you down a lot in front of people.

In sum, the analysis shows that the descriptions mainly focus on caregiver behaviour that comprise EMT or EA. In the item-level descriptions, however, some descriptions additionally concentrates on how some of these caregiver behaviours influences the feelings and experiences of children and youth.

4 | DISCUSSION

The current scoping review aims to explore how EA is defined and described in research on child welfare and social work based on research published in the period 2015–2021. Overall, the results reveal a lack of research from the perspective of children and youth in contact with CWS and from child welfare workers.

The included studies in the review originated from six countries, most of them from the USA. The review indicates that there are various, and somewhat inconsistent, ways of labelling EA within and between research communities and countries, which relate to previous research (North, 2022; Ottosen et al., 2020). The review further indicates that there is a lack of explicit terminology in the reviewed literature. This may influence the reliability and credibility in research, as it is unclear if the researchers are studying the same phenomenon. For quantitative research this is especially important, because it affects what are counted as EA, and what is not. This further influences the opportunities to acquire knowledge of the prevalence of EA, to examine long-term consequences of EA, and how results of preventive and supportive interventions are interpreted. Explicit terminology could also enhance the prospects of comparing results between studies and countries. For practice, however, terminology is of importance due to the awareness of EA as a phenomenon. This influences how child welfare workers engage and intervene with EA. Consequently, terminology used in research publications have the potential to contribute to nuanced understandings of the diversities and similarities among terms, not just in research, but also in professional practice.

The findings across the reviewed studies reveal that the definitions of EMT and EA include both an expression of the concept, and a statement of how this may harm children. The descriptions, however, mainly traces evidence of EA in actual behaviours of parents. A scarce amount of descriptions of EA focuses on how these behaviours influences children's emotions and experiences (Auslander et al., 2016; Ellenbogen et al., 2015; Galitto, 2017; Kobulsky et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2019). Further, this review support previous research which have argued that the nature of EA is difficult to define and operationalize (Trickett et al., 2009; North, 2022). Moreover, the definitions and descriptions of EA in this review are mainly gathered from studies with a quantitative design. Quantitative studies could be valuable, with consistent or explicit terminology, when it comes to understanding the prevalence and consequences of EA, the overlap between various forms of abuse, and effective interventions of prevention and support. Qualitative studies, however, has the potential of complementing this knowledge by aiming for a deeper and more nuanced knowledge to these areas. Only two of the included studies in the

review have a qualitative design. These are focusing on social workers subjectivity and reflexivity when intervening with EA in families (North, 2019, 2022). Thus, this review exposes a need for supplemental research exploring how child welfare workers describe and understand EA.

Additionally, this review reveals limited focus on including children and youth in research on EA in child welfare context. In the reviewed literature, their views and perspectives are dealt with through self-report instruments and structured interviews. Such research limits children's possibilities to share their experiences with EA, since it is predetermined which categories they can answer within. Moreover, there is a lack of studies based on interviews with children and youth with the focus on their descriptions and unique experiences with EA. If research should have relevance for child welfare practice, it is crucial to elaborate EA from the perspective of children and youth. Their perspective have the capacity to complement the focus from quantitative studies in several ways. First, it could supplement existing knowledge on how EA is experienced by children and youth living in different family- and societal contexts. Second, it may elaborate on children's susceptibility and resilience in relation to EA and how it influences their well-being. Last, it may add insight on how children and youth experience the help and support provided by CWS.

4.1 | Strengths and limitations

The current scoping review has several strengths worth highlighting. EMT and EA represent an increasing priority within the context of child welfare. The literature search was assisted by an experienced research librarian, and all concerns and uncertainties about screening of title, abstract and full text were reviewed and discussed with supervisors. So were the analytical process and generation of themes. However, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the screening of title and abstract for eligibility was initially performed of the author alone, which may cause a risk of bias in the selection process. As previously described, all uncertainties and doubts were discussed until consensus was reached with supervisors. Second, scoping reviews do not assess study quality, as such, information extracted from both weak and strong studies is considered. Third, only peer-reviewed articles providing a sufficient definition or description of EA were included. Forth, the review only included literature published in English in the period 2015–2021. Different selection criteria, search words and search strings could include other interesting studies. Although the review was broad, some relevant studies may have been overlooked. Despite these limitations, there are reasons to argue that this scoping review has the scope and potential to raise further awareness of the current definitions and descriptions of emotional abuse in research, as well as addressing some future research needs.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This scoping review provides a comprehensive summary of how research on child welfare and social work define and describe EA. This

review underscores the limited research conducted on qualitative descriptions of experiences engaging and intervening with EA in child welfare and social work. Moreover, this review emphasizes the need of exploring EA with various methodologies, and especially by including children and youth in research on EA. Such research may expand the current knowledge of the definitions and descriptions on EA by providing a more nuanced understanding of how children and youth experience EA, and elaborate on their susceptibility and resilience in relation to their experiences of EA. Accordingly, this could further lead to progress in practice when it comes to supporting children and youth experiencing EA, increasing awareness and knowledge on EA, and establishing a more nuanced framework for understanding EA.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I declare no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are listed in the reference list of this article.

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APPENDIX A: PREFERRED REPORTED ITEMS FOR SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS AND META-ANALYSIS, EXTENSION FOR SCOPING REVIEWS

SECTION	ITEM	PRISMA-ScR CHECKLIST ITEM	REPORTED ON PAGE #
TITLE			
Title	1	Identify the report as a scoping review.	Title page
ABSTRACT			
Structured summary	2	Provide a structured summary that includes (as applicable): background, objectives, eligibility criteria, sources of evidence, charting methods, results, and conclusions that relate to the review questions and objectives.	1
INTRODUCTION			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of what is already known. Explain why the review questions/objectives lend themselves to a scoping review approach.	1/2
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the questions and objectives being addressed with reference to their key elements (e.g., population or participants, concepts, and context) or other relevant key elements used to conceptualize the review questions and/or objectives.	3
METHODS			
Protocol and registration	5	Indicate whether a review protocol exists; state if and where it can be accessed (e.g., a Web address); and if available, provide registration information, including the registration number.	N/A
Eligibility criteria	6	Specify characteristics of the sources of evidence used as eligibility criteria (e.g., years considered, language, and publication status), and provide a rationale.	3/4
Information sources ^a	7	Describe all information sources in the search (e.g., databases with dates of coverage and contact with authors to identify additional sources), as well as the date the most recent search was executed.	3
Search	8	Present the full electronic search strategy for at least 1 database, including any limits used, such that it could be repeated.	4

(Continues)

SECTION	ITEM	PRISMA-ScR CHECKLIST ITEM	REPORTED ON PAGE #
Selection of sources of evidence ^b	9	State the process for selecting sources of evidence (i.e., screening and eligibility) included in the scoping review.	
Data charting process ^c	10	Describe the methods of charting data from the included sources of evidence (e.g., calibrated forms or forms that have been tested by the team before their use, and whether data charting was done independently or in duplicate) and any processes for obtaining and confirming data from investigators.	4/5
Data items	11	List and define all variables for which data were sought and any assumptions and simplifications made.	N/A
Critical appraisal of individual sources of evidence ^d	12	If done, provide a rationale for conducting a critical appraisal of included sources of evidence; describe the methods used and how this information was used in any data synthesis (if appropriate).	N/A
Synthesis of results	13	Describe the methods of handling and summarizing the data that were charted.	4/5
RESULTS			
Selection of sources of evidence	14	Give numbers of sources of evidence screened, assessed for eligibility, and included in the review, with reasons for exclusions at each stage, ideally using a flow diagram.	4 and Figure 1
Characteristics of sources of evidence	15	For each source of evidence, present characteristics for which data were charted and provide the citations.	Appendix 3
Critical appraisal within sources of evidence	16	If done, present data on critical appraisal of included sources of evidence (see item 12).	N/A
Results of individual sources of evidence	17	For each included source of evidence, present the relevant data that were charted that relate to the review questions and objectives.	Appendix 3
Synthesis of results	18	Summarize and/or present the charting results as they relate to the review questions and objectives.	5 -11
DISCUSSION			
Summary of evidence	19	Summarize the main results (including an overview of concepts, themes, and types of evidence available), link to the review questions and objectives, and consider the relevance to key groups.	11-13
Limitations	20	Discuss the limitations of the scoping review process.	13
Conclusions	21	Provide a general interpretation of the results with respect to the review questions and objectives, as well as potential implications and/or next steps.	14
FUNDING			
Funding	22	Describe sources of funding for the included sources of evidence, as well as sources of funding for the scoping review. Describe the role of the funders of the scoping review.	Title page

Abbreviations: JBI, Joanna Briggs Institute; PRISMA-ScR, Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews.

^a Where sources of evidence (see second footnote) are compiled from, such as bibliographic databases, social media platforms, and Web sites.

^b A more inclusive/heterogeneous term used to account for the different types of evidence or data sources (e.g., quantitative and/or qualitative research, expert opinion, and policy documents) that may be eligible in a scoping review as opposed to only studies. This is not to be confused with *information sources* (see first footnote).

^c The frameworks by Arksey and O'Malley (6) and Levac and colleagues (7) and the JBI guidance (4, 5) refer to the process of data extraction in a scoping review as data charting.

^d The process of systematically examining research evidence to assess its validity, results, and relevance before using it to inform a decision. This term is used for items 12 and 19 instead of "risk of bias" (which is more applicable to systematic reviews of interventions) to include and acknowledge the various sources of evidence that may be used in a scoping review (e.g., quantitative and/or qualitative research, expert opinion, and policy document).

From: Tricco AC, Lillie E, Zarin W, O'Brien KK, Colquhoun H, Levac D, et al. PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR): Checklist and Explanation. Ann Intern Med. 2018;169:467–473. doi: 10.7326/M18-0850.

APPENDIX B: DOCUMENTATION OF THE SEARCH STRATEGIES ADOPTED IN THE VARIOUS DATABASES

APA psychINFO

<https://ovidsp.ovid.com/ovidweb.cgi?T=JS&NEWS=N&PAGE=main&SHAREDSEARCHID=7aKSd67Y5ru8BiNCOUPsKvNmWsqqHO2ye2T5z5o9zoyJ9xoLqXVz1CPE6JlLaA8W>

Search number	Search	Hits
1	exp 'emotional abuse'	2842
2	('emotional abuse*' or 'emotional maltreat*' or 'emotional violence*' or 'psychological abuse*' or 'psychological maltreat*' or 'psychological violence*').mp.	7091
3	1 OR 2	7091
4	('child welfare' or 'child protect*' or 'social work').mp.	52,309
5	3 and 4	445
6	Limit 5 to (English language and year = '2015-2022')	146

Web of science

<https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/summary/d09f4caf-bd5c-466e-a877-a983055f87b5-17e12d3a/relevance/1>

Search number	Search	Hits
1	('emotional abuse*' or 'emotional maltreat*' or 'emotional violence*' or 'psychological abuse*' or 'psychological maltreat*' or 'psychological violence*') (Topic)	5821
2	('child welfare' or 'child protect*' or 'social work') (Topic)	41,554
3	1 AND 2	294
4	Limit: 2015-01-01-2021-12-09	158

Social services abstract

<https://www.proquest.com/recentsearches?accountid=26469#>

Search number	Search	Hits
1	ab ('emotional abuse*' OR 'emotional maltreat*' OR 'emotional violence*' OR 'psychological abuse*' OR 'psychological maltreat*' OR 'psychological violence*')	21,282
2	ab ('child welfare' OR 'child protect*' OR 'social work')	188,460
3	S1 and S2	761
4	S1 and S2 limit: peer-reviewed	247
5	S1 and S2 limit: 2015-01-01-2021-12-09	109

Scopus

Search number	Search	Hits
1	Title-abs-key ('emotional abuse*' OR 'emotional maltreat*' OR 'emotional violence*' OR 'psychological abuse**' OR 'psychological maltreat**' OR 'psychological violence**')	8661
2	Title-abstract-key 'child welfare' OR 'child protect**' OR 'social services'	100,940
3	1 and 2	605
4	Limit 4 and pubyear >2014	323

Medline

<https://ovidsp.ovid.com/ovidweb.cgi?T=JS&NEWS=N&PAGE=main&SHAREDSEARCHID=25BTsNKSvPIMovQz6hNphTm7rbsQDKdBYytO795HDoprBsFuDdHxAlshpj7HDgoFv>

Search number	Search	Hits
1	('emotional abuse**' or 'emotional maltreat*' or 'emotional violence*' or 'psychological abuse**' or 'psychological maltreat**' or 'psychological violence**').mp.	3657
2	('child welfare' OR 'child protect**' OR 'social work').mp.	45,861
3	1 and 2	191
4	Limit 3 to year = "2015–2022"	93
5	Limit 4 to English language	89

APPENDIX C: OVERVIEW OVER INCLUDED STUDIES

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim/purpose	Methodology, study population, sample size (if applicable)	Main findings of relevance for the research question
Auslander et al. (2016) USA	Describe the mental health pathways by which histories of child abuse lead to aggression (verbal, physical and relational) among adolescent girls.	Face-to-face structured interviews. 237 girls ages 12–19 years, involved with child welfare system.	Describes EA through examples of items from the subscale of emotional abuse in The Child Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (CTQ-SF).
Brassard et al. (2020) USA	Provide a history of EMT and its relationship to children's rights, give an overview of the current state of knowledge, implications of diversity for the topic of EMT, and a vision for further progress in addressing EMT as a child rights issue through theory, research, policy and practice.	Literature review, intervention description, expert opinion.	Points out synonyms and overlapping terms to EA. Label EA as part of EMT. Include definition of EMT adopted by ASPAC. Describes EA through items from ACE Questionnaire (Adverse Childhood Experiences).

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim/purpose	Methodology, study population, sample size (if applicable)	Main findings of relevance for the research question
Brown et al. (2019) USA	Expand the literature on childhood adversity by exploring the complex adverse experiences of children investigated for child maltreatment based on their developmental stages.	Quantitative, cross-sectional data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being II (NSCAW-II): A National, longitudinal, multi-informant study of children in contact with child welfare services. 5870 children, 0–18 years investigated for child maltreatment.	Provides a description of EA, and exemplifies through items from ACE Questionnaire.
Bunting et al. (2018) UK	Compare trends in official data relating to the operation of the child protection and looked after systems across the United Kingdom. Focus on child protection processes.	Quantitative national administrative data published annually in each of the four UK nations.	Include a definition of EA from England, and the UK nations.
Cohen and Thakur (2021) USA	Examine how emotional abuse and emotional neglect exposure in adolescence uniquely relate to psychological symptoms and social impairment.	A multi-method, multi-wave, longitudinal study. CVS-involved sample of 657 adolescents who were participating in a longitudinal study: NSCAW-II.	Describes EA through example items from Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-PC).
Ellenbogen et al. (2015) Canada	Determine whether shame, guilt, and external blaming that arise from experiences of physical abuse victimization are associated with level of physical abuse and other forms of maltreatment, and anger, hostility and physical aggression.	Quantitative, self-report data from a larger study of adolescents receiving child protective services; Maltreatment and Adolescent Pathways project (MAP). 309 youth.	Describing EA through example items from CTQ-SF.
English et al. (2015) USA	Describe the nature and characteristics of EMT experienced by youth across time. Describe the relation between four subtypes of EMT and child trauma symptoms and risk behaviours at age 18.	Secondary data analysis using data collected by the Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN). 846 children.	Pointing out overlapping terms to EMT; psychological abuse, psychological neglect, emotional abuse and emotional neglect, psychological maltreatment. Label EA part of EMT. Include definition of EMT (MMCS)
Galutto et al. (2017) Canada	Examine trauma symptom profiles among child welfare involved 13–17 years old and evaluate the relationship of those trauma symptom profiles to maltreatment experiences, socio-demographics and child welfare variables.	Data from MAP project. 479 adolescents (13–17 years) involved with the Canadian child welfare system.	Describing EA through example items from Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ).
Kim et al. (2017) USA	Examine patterns and correlates of the types of maltreatment experienced by adolescents aged 9–12.	Ongoing longitudinal study of the effects of maltreatment on adolescent development. 303 children, 9–12 year.	Describing EA drawing on the definition from the Maltreatment Classification System (MCS), modified by LONGSCAN (MMCS).
Kloppen et al. (2015) Norway	Examine the prevalence of different forms of intrafamilial child maltreatment in the Nordic countries and possible changes in the prevalence rates over the past two decades.	Literature review, 24 Nordic studies included	Include a definition of EA developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), and descriptions of EA from the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect.
Kobulsky et al. (2018) USA	Examine concordance between youth self-report and CPS administrative records of physical, emotional and sexual abuse determinations.	The study draws from LONGSCAN. 819 youths with completed 18-year interviews.	Describes EA through example items from LONGSCAN developed measures for self-report abuse scales.
Kobulsky et al. (2021) USA	Examine the associations of subtypes of mid-adolescent neglect on late adolescent health risk.	1050 adolescents who completed 16- and/or 18-year interviews as part of the LONGSCAN	Describes EA through example items from LONGSCAN developed measures for self-report abuse scales.

(Continues)

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim/purpose	Methodology, study population, sample size (if applicable)	Main findings of relevance for the research question
Lavi et al. (2019) USA/Israel	Examine the role of emotion reactivity and emotion regulation in emotionally maltreating families with levels of non-maltreating families.	Literature review, meta-analysis 9 studies.	Points out that EMT often is used synonymously with psychological abuse. Label EA as an element of EMT through CTQ which includes two subscales of EMT: EA and emotional neglect. Include definition of EMT(APSAC). Describes EA through examples items.
Lewis et al. (2019) USA	Examine the unique and combined role of emotional abuse in smoking during adolescence among a large sample of high-risk youth.	Data from LONGSCAN. 775 adolescents.	Describes EA through examples indicators from MMSC and sample items from LONGSCAN developed self-report measures of maltreatment experiences.
Liu and Vaughn (2019) USA	Review international norms associated with mandatory reporting of child abuse and assesses court cases within the United States that involve mandatory reporting, identifying important issues and underlying problems with the current mandatory reporting system	Review international norms associated with mandatory reporting of child abuse.	Include a definition of EA.
Naughton et al. (2017) UK	Identify the scientific evidence behind the self-reported features in adolescents aged 13–17 completed years, who are experiencing substantiated neglect and/or emotional maltreatment.	Rapid review, 19 publications included.	Points out synonyms to EA. Define EA as a subtype of EMT. Include a definition EMT(APSAC), and a definition EA from the World Health Organization (2002).
North (2019) UK	Make the less tangible aspects of work with emotional abuse more visible, and improve professional understandings of how to work with it more effectively.	Qualitative semi-structured interviews individual.	Include a definition of EA.
North (2022) UK	Explore some of the ways in which child protection social workers in England intervene with emotional abuse.	Qualitative semi-structured interviews.	Describe EA as a part of EMT, and how these terms are used differently in the USA and UK. Include description of EMT, corresponding with the APSAC standard.
Osborne et al. (2022) USA	Examine the proportion of adolescents reporting in-home firearm availability, the proportion of adolescents with suicidal ideation reporting availability, and the relationship between child maltreatment victimization and availability	Secondary data analysis of data from LONGSCAN. 1354 parent-child dyads.	Describe EA through example items from LONGSCAN developed measures.
Paul and Eckenrode (2015) USA	Understand how subtypes and the timing of PMT contribute to adolescent depressive symptoms at age 14.	Prospective, longitudinal design. 638 youth from LONGSCAN.	Points out that investigations of psychological maltreatment also use the terms EMT, EA, emotional neglect. Describe EA as part of EMT. Include definition and description of EMT (APSAC).

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim/purpose	Methodology, study population, sample size (if applicable)	Main findings of relevance for the research question
Silva and Calheiros (2020) Portugal	Explore the indirect associations between maltreatment experiences and children's and adolescents' psychopathology symptoms, through their domain-specific self-representations.	Multi-informant study, including 203 children/adolescents (8–16 years old) referred to child/youth protection commissions, their parents and case workers.	Defines and describes EA through items from Maltreatment severity questionnaire (MSQ).
Vahl et al. (2016) Belgium.	Examine gender differences in EMT and related mental health problems among detained boys and girls.	Self-report measures of maltreatment experiences and mental health problems. 341 adolescents (12–18 years) recruited from Juvenile Detention Centers in Flanders, Belgium.	Label EA as a subtype of EMT. Provides a description of EA.
Villodas et al. (2021) USA	Identify unobserved groups of youth with distinct patterns of lifetime CAN experiences that occurred between birth and age 16 using LCA and examine group differences in mental health symptoms during late adolescence.	Prospective, multi-informed data, including child protective services records and caregiver and youth reports. 919 adolescent-caregiver dyads. Data drawn from LONGSCAN.	Describes psychological abuse through self-report measures corresponding with MMSC categories.
White et al. (2016) USA	Examine concordance between youth self-report of EMT and official reports, and the relation between the experience of EMT in childhood and trauma symptoms and risk behaviours in young adulthood.	Data collected by LONGSCAN. 770 participants.	Label EA as a part of EMT. Include a definition of EMT (MMCS).
Yoon (2017) USA	Examine child maltreatment characteristics, including types, level of harm, and timing, as predictors of internalizing trajectory patterns.	Secondary, longitudinal research drawn from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being I (NSCAW-I) 541 children (4–5 years at baseline) involved with the child welfare system.	Describes EA through examples items from CTS-PC.
Yoon et al. (2019) USA	Investigate the role of self-esteem as a mediator in the association between different types of child maltreatment and depressive symptomatology among a sample of adolescents in out-of-home care.	404 adolescents who were in out-of-home care. Data derived from the Mental Health Service Use of Youth Leaving Foster Care Study.	Describes EA through examples items from CTS-PC.

Abbreviations: EA, emotional abuse; EMT, emotional maltreatment.

Ness, S. (2023). 'It's not like we use the word emotional abuse.' A study of how Norwegian child welfare workers describe and understand emotional abuse of children. *Child abuse & Neglect* 146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chabu.2023.106504>



'It's not like we use the word emotional abuse'. A study on Norwegian child welfare workers understanding of emotional abuse

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite the recognition of emotional abuse (EA) as the most pervasive and harmful of all forms of child maltreatment, it is argued to be less understood than other forms of child maltreatment. EA is regarded as a standalone form for maltreatment and an essential factor embedded in all other forms of maltreatment of children, such as physical and sexual abuse. Thus, it is crucial for child welfare workers to understand EA, as one of their core mandates is to prevent and protect children from all forms of maltreatment.

Objective: This study aims to explore how child welfare workers in Norway describe and understand EA.

Participants and setting: The study included 24 child welfare workers in 6 child welfare offices in Norway.

Methods: The data were obtained from focus group interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: Overall, the findings reveal that EA was unfamiliar to the child welfare workers, and that there is a low degree of awareness on EA among the study participants. Further, EA is closely connected to whether parents provide sufficient emotional care for their children and is understood as part of the complex situation surrounding the child.

Conclusions: This article concludes with the need for reflective and sensitive discussions regarding understanding and awareness of EA in child welfare work. This has the potential to lead to greater insights into how EA is understood by child welfare workers as well as to enhance child welfare workers' abilities to describe, communicate about, and document EA.

1. Introduction

Child welfare workers' understanding of child abuse and maltreatment have implications for the response and assistance provided by child welfare services (CWS) (Aadnanes, 2020; Aakvaag, Thoresen, & Øverlien, 2016). Accordingly, a recent literature review on how Norwegian CWS work with children who experience maltreatment demonstrates a need to focus on how child welfare workers understand and intervene in different forms of maltreatment (Kojan et al., 2020). Child abuse and maltreatment are commonly classified into sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, neglect, and children experiencing domestic abuse and violence (e.g., Butchart, Harvey, Mian, et al., 2006; Meinck et al., 2016; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Alink, 2015). Emotional and psychological abuse, as well as neglect, are argued to have been given the least attention in research, policy, and child

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welfare work (e.g., Brassard, Hart, & Glaser, 2020; Kloppen, Mæhle, Kvello, & Breivik, 2015). Moreover, emotional and psychological abuse, and neglect are argued to be less understood than other forms of child maltreatment (Aadnanes, 2020; Munro, 2020).

Despite sparse attention and challenges inherent in understanding emotional abuse (EA) and neglect, these forms of child abuse and maltreatment is recognized as the most pervasive and harmful of all forms of child maltreatment (Brassard et al., 2020; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). This is also supported by research that includes children's experiences with maltreatment. In these studies, the participants consider EA and neglect the most hurtful of their experiences of maltreatment (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2018; Øverlien, 2012). Numerous studies further demonstrate that experiences with EA and neglect are likely to have long-lasting and wide-ranging impacts on the well-being, health, and emotional and behavioral development of children and youth (e.g., Brassard, 2019; Felitti et al., 2019; Spinazzola et al., 2014). Due to these severe consequences, it is crucial for child welfare workers to understand this form of maltreatment, as one of their core mandates is to prevent and protect children from all forms of maltreatment (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). To the best of my knowledge, no prior studies have explored how Norwegian child welfare workers understand EA of children. This study, thus, directs its attention to how child welfare workers understand EA by illuminating the following research question: *How is emotional abuse of children described and understood by child welfare workers?*

1.1. Conceptualizing emotional abuse

The aim of this study is to explore the diversity in how Norwegian child welfare workers describe and understand EA, as it is variations in how EA is referred to, defined, operationalized, and interpreted between and within countries, cultures, and professions (Kloppen et al., 2015; author blinded for review, 2023; North, 2022; Ottosen, Frederiksen, & Henze-Pederesen, 2020). In the following I clarify how EA is conceptualized in this study.

In the literature on EA, the terms *emotional* and *psychological* are used in a varied manner. Certain researchers argue that there is no sufficient justification to distinguish between these terms (English, Thompson, White, & Wilson, 2015; Glaser, 2011). However, other researchers prefer *psychological* to *emotional*, as they argue that the word *psychological* is more comprehensive and incorporates the cognitive, affective, volitional, and interpersonal aspects of perpetration and outcomes of this form of child maltreatment (Hart, Brassard, Baker, & Chiel, 2018). For the purposes of this research, the term *emotional* is used, with the aim of creating a conceptual coherence between EA and emotional neglect. These concepts are both included in the broader term 'emotional (or psychological) maltreatment' (Hart et al., 2018). Further, this study utilizes the term *abuse*, even though the term *violence* is preferred in the Norwegian context. In this study, *abuse* is used to encourage a wider perspective and with the purpose of avoiding an excessive focus on the physical aspects of violence (Macy, Bradbury-Jones, Øverlien, Holt, & Devnaey, 2021).

Abuse is understood to be a part of the broader term *maltreatment* which includes both acts of commission (abuse) and omission (neglect) (Hart et al., 2018). EA is in this understanding conceptualized as actively harmful behavior (commission), while emotional neglect is described as the absence of emotional warmth (omission) (Hart et al., 2018). The actively harmful behaviors that comprise EA are the specific focus in this study. Nevertheless, the similar characteristics of EA and emotional neglect makes it challenging to distinguish children's experiences with these two concepts, both in the literature and in child welfare work (Hart et al., 2018; Ottosen et al., 2020; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009).

This study leans upon the definition and operationalization of emotional maltreatment given by Hart et al. (2018), p. 147):

"a repeated pattern or extreme incident(s) of caretaker behavior that thwart the child's basic psychological needs (e.g., safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, respect) and convey a child is worthless, defective, damaged goods, unloved, unwanted, endangered, primarily useful in meeting another's needs, and/or expandable".

This understanding classifies emotional maltreatment into the following six areas: 1) spurning; 2) terrorizing; 3) exploiting/corrupting; 4) emotional unresponsiveness; 5) isolating; and 6) mental health, medical and educational neglect. Areas 1, 2, 3, and 5 address EA, while the other two areas (4 and 6) address emotional neglect (Ottosen et al., 2020). In this operationalization, children who experience domestic abuse and violence are considered EA and are included in terrorizing (Hart et al., 2018). Like this conceptualization of emotional maltreatment, the Norwegian government also refers to EA and emotional neglect as two separate categories. The Norwegian government, however, often refers to the conceptualization of child abuse and violence given by the World Health Organization (2002) which divides child maltreatment into the following five forms: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, neglect, and children exposed to domestic abuse and violence (e.g., Kloppen et al., 2015; Meinck et al., 2016).

As outlined above, the national and international terminologies, operationalizations and definitions of EA are varying. Thus, the translations of terminology and adoptions of operationalizations and definitions are not unproblematic, as they do not always refer to the same phenomenon. I respect other conceptualizations and also recognize that the selected terminology, operationalization, and definition have limitations while aiming to include an easily recognizable conceptualization both in the national and international contexts. Despite this limitation, the aim of this study is to explore how child welfare workers describe and understand EA. Thus, it is necessary to employ a broad conceptualization and make space for the participants' descriptions, interpretations, and understanding of the phenomenon under study.

1.2. Challenges inherent in understanding emotional abuse

Even though there is limited research on Norwegian child welfare workers understanding of EA, there is extended literature on challenges inherent in understanding EA. Certain studies also demonstrate how these challenges have implications for child welfare work. In the following, these challenges, and implications will be illuminated.

As mentioned, one challenge in understanding EA is the varying terminology, operationalization, and definitions. This is elaborated

on in a recent literature review, which proposes that these variations may affect child welfare workers' awareness of EA as well as how they engage and intervene with EA (Ness, 2023). Despite varying conceptualizations of EA, it is primarily understood as repetitive actions included in a pattern of deficient parenting that conveys to children that they are worthless, unloved, and unwanted (Ness, 2023). Thus, EA is evident in the quality of the relationship between a primary caregiver and a child in terms of being constituted by discrete and reoccurring incidents. This makes the nature of EA invisible and intangible, and studies have argued that this challenges child welfare workers' understanding of EA as well as naming, addressing, and attributing EA clearly to parents (Iwaniec, Larkin, & McSherry, 2007; North, 2022).

Another challenge in understanding EA is how it is not recognized only as a standalone form of maltreatment, but also as an essential underlying component of other forms of maltreatment, either in parental action or in outcomes for the affected children (Brassard, Hart, Baker, & Chiel, 2017; Hart et al., 2011). Thus, the described nature of EA is challenging to observe both in isolation and alongside other forms of abuse, as EA is perceived as less concrete and less observable than, for example, physical abuse. Studies have shown that this will likely cause challenges for child welfare workers in recognizing, identifying, investigating, and evidence on EA (Iwaniec, Larkin, & Higgins, 2006; Iwaniec et al., 2007; North, 2022).

A third challenge of understanding EA are the differences in accepted parenting practices and norms for child rearing in different societies and contexts (Baker, Brassard, & Rosenzweig, 2021; Iwaniec et al., 2007; Munro, 2020; North, 2022). EA is mainly described in parental behaviors, which is challenging, as the behaviors and interactions that are indicative of EA also occur in normal family life and are not necessarily harmful to children (Baker et al., 2021; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). Studies have demonstrated that the varying thresholds for when parental behaviors are considered harmful for children is challenging for child welfare workers in their efforts in assessing the boundaries between inadequate parenting practices and emotionally abusive behavior posing harm to children (Munro, 2020; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011).

1.3. Professional discretion in child welfare work with EA

The Norwegian policy and legislation emphasize children's right to a life free from all forms of abuse and violence (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). This represents a zero-tolerance ideal against abuse and violence. However, such an ideal requires a clear definition of what abuse is, and what children should be prevented and protected from. This is challenging when it comes to EA, since a professional consensus has not been reached regarding what constitutes emotionally abusive and neglectful behaviors (Munro, 2020; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011).

Even though EA is described in length in Norwegian legislation and policy, it is broadly formulated, and there is low clarity regarding where the thresholds for intervention should be. Child welfare workers, thus, work in what is described as the 'swampy lowlands of practice', where it is challenging to find simple solutions, or descriptions, to complex situations (Schön, 1983). Because of this practice landscape, conditions of uncertainty, and the complex challenges inherent in understanding and describing EA, child welfare work with EA requires a high degree of professional discretion (Molander, 2016).

Professional discretion is characterized by applying knowledge to connect and classify a concrete situation to a professional understanding of the problem (Abbott, 1988). Child welfare workers, thus, must negotiate their understanding of EA by utilizing different structures in child welfare work, such as child welfare legislation, as well as the mandate, intentions, and governmental guidelines for Norwegian CWS. They also base their understandings of EA on their personal and professional experiences and knowledge, the prevailing knowledge base, and the established ideals for parenting practices and childrearing. These mentioned structures, experiences, ideals and knowledge, thus, shape the professional discretion of child welfare workers. Therefore, I will in the following account, provide a brief overview of relevant child welfare work approaches, the prevailing knowledge base and ideals for parenting practices in the Norwegian CWS.

The overall aim of the Norwegian CWS is to ensure the provision of appropriate help and care, at the right time, for children and young people who live in circumstances that are potentially harmful to their health and development (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). Thus, the mandate of the Norwegian CWS is twofold: a welfare mandate in terms of supporting children and families to prevent abuse and neglect, and a protection mandate that involves taking coercive and compulsory action to protect children from maltreatment (Falch-Eriksen & Skivenes, 2019).

The Norwegian CWS is typically described as service- and family-oriented, because of its prioritization of voluntary and preventive measures in the home, and its low threshold for implementing measures (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011; Pösö, Skivenes, & og Hestbæk, 2014; Skivenes & Søvig, 2017). However, recent research has also demonstrated that the Norwegian CWS is risk-oriented, with a specific focus on the deficits of parents and children (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Ellingsen, Studsrød, & og Ursin, 2019; Feyling & Øfsti, 2023). The risk-oriented approach is closely linked to the protection mandate of child welfare, as it aims to prevent and reduce a potential risk that children may be exposed to. However, this approach is criticized and problematized because it leads the CWS to be more concerned with clarifying the risk for abuse rather than the families need for support (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Backe-Hansen, Smette, & Vislie, 2017; Christiansen et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the government's plan for combating abuse and violence includes a risk-oriented approach. This is, thus, in line with the authorities' expectations of the CWS efforts to combat abuse and violence (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2014-2017).

Further, the Norwegian CWS is described as child-centric in terms of aiming to protect children from abuse and maltreatment as well as facilitating what we, as a society, understand as a good childhood and the best possible growing up and development conditions for children (Hennum, 2016; Pösö et al., 2014). In the Norwegian society, this implies a distinct focus on how parents bring up children in a developmentally supportive manner. The role of emotions and the children's feelings of safety is highly emphasized (Fævelen, Fauske, Kojan, & Kaasbøll, 2023). When making decisions in the Norwegian CWS, the focus, thus, is on the relational and emotional

aspects in parent-child relationships as well as on ensuring that children are provided sufficient emotional care (Hennum, 2016; Skilbred and Havnen, 2017). Further, the problems children encounter is often justified based on how parents fail to provide sufficient emotional care for their children or how parents lack normative parenting competencies (Hennum, 2016). Accordingly, a central feature of the Norwegian CWS is to provide services that aims to improve parental competencies and ensuring sufficient emotional care for children (Christiansen & Hollekim, 2018; Krutzinna & Skivenes, 2020).

According to the child-centric values, all measures initiated by the Norwegian CWS should be founded in the idea of the “best interest of the child,” and children are perceived as individuals with their own interests and rights, thereby making their position in policy and legislation strong (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). For child welfare workers, it is a specific mandate to include children's perspectives both when it comes to talking to the child and considering its view of the situation in child welfare decisions and assessments (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). Despite this mandate, studies argue that child welfare workers find it challenging to involve children and their perspectives when making assessments, and that the perspectives of children are often not sufficiently heard before decisions are made (Ormstad et al., 2020).

As outlined, the described characteristics, approaches, prevailing knowledge base and ideals for parenting practices shape the professional discretion of child welfare workers. It is therefore argued that reflection, in terms of looking back on what enables and constrains understandings and actions, is crucial to create new insights, perspectives, recognitions and expanded understandings of complex concepts and situations in child welfare work (Nordstoga Nordstoga, 2019). Reflection is, thus, a necessary element of developing as a professional (Schön, 1983), and it has the potential to strengthen the professional discretion in child welfare work with EA.

This study of understandings of emotional abuse is related to the specific context of Norwegian child welfare services. Despite this, there are reasons to believe that the findings are relevant to other child welfare systems as knowledge regarding child welfare workers' descriptions and understanding of EA of children are applicable beyond the Norwegian child welfare context.

2. Method and analysis

This study is part of a Ph.D. project with the overall aim of exploring how EA is understood in child welfare work. The current article is a qualitative study based on 24 child welfare workers' descriptions and understandings of EA of children.

2.1. Sampling and recruitment

The child welfare workers who participated in this study were recruited based on their formal qualifications as child welfare workers or social workers. They were further required to have more than one year of working experience as caseworkers in child welfare work at the municipality level in Norway. The management of the six child welfare offices who participated in the overall Ph.D. project sent an e-mail with an initial request and with information about the study to the relevant child welfare workers. Potential participants were provided with additional information regarding the study, which included written and oral information about the study, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the research project at any stage without explanation. Moreover, participation was based on a voluntary, informed consent, and the study was registered and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, #210395).

The 24 child welfare workers that participated in this study, worked in 6 different child welfare offices in different parts of Norway. The offices had varying sizes and organizational structure. Most of the participants were women, thereby reflecting the common gender imbalance in the Norwegian child welfare services. The age of the participants varied from 22 to 65 years, and their experience varied from 2 to over 30 years. All but two of the participants in the final sample were educated as child welfare or social workers. One of these two was educated as a preschool teacher, and one held a bachelor in psychology. Despite a different educational background than the other participants, both worked as a “contact person” or “caseworker” and both had extended relevant experience in the context of child welfare services at a municipality level.

2.2. Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were considered the most appropriate method for data collection as they are argued to be suitable when the purpose of the research is to elicit people's own understanding, opinions or views, or when the purpose is to explore how these are advanced, elaborated, and negotiated in a specific context (Wilkinson, 2015). To obtain rich and nuanced data about the stated research question, a topic-guide was developed based on previous research on EA and on the theoretical and contextual framework presented earlier in this article. The topics centered around the child welfare workers' descriptions of EA, their understanding of EA, and their experiences of working with EA in the different phases of child welfare work, such as investigation, communicating with parents and children and decision-making regarding thresholds and level of support.

To explore the research question and the mentioned topics, six focus group interviews were conducted by me. The size of the focus groups varied from three to seven participants. All participants received information regarding the purpose of the study beforehand, which allowed them to reflect upon the topics of discussions prior to the interview. Of the six interviews, three were conducted at the location of the specific child welfare offices, while three interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams and Zoom due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The focus group interviews began with a presentation of the main topic for discussion, a presentation of the purpose of the study and of the researcher, and relevant ethical issues. In addition, these interviews were conducted with a few “ground rules” to ensure that only one participant speaks at a time, that different views should be respected, and that the

confidentiality of each participant is maintained. Moreover, in online interviews, the “raise hand” function was used in all three interviews.

The participants in the focus groups were recruited from the same child welfare office. In one of the focus groups, I was familiar with two of the participants from my earlier work background. The fact that the participants were colleagues, and that I was familiar to a few participants may have affected the conversations in terms of creating unwanted group dynamics, flow in the discussions, and the participants expressions of perceptions, understandings and diverging opinions (Malterud, 2012, 2017). Despite these mentioned factors, there were limited variations in duration, content, or depth between the interviews. All interviews centered around the topics relevant to the study, and the participants were in general active and engaged throughout the interviews. The focus group interviews covered the mentioned topics which were relevant for the study, and the discussions generated reflections and interactions among the participants in the focus group interviews. Each interview lasted for 75–90 min, and they were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2.3. Analyzing the data

The data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). In line with this approach, I first read and then reread the transcriptions, while taking initial analytical notes to familiarize myself with the data. Further, I systematically coded the transcriptions relevant to the research question guiding the analysis, which in this study was “*How is emotional abuse of children described and understood by child welfare workers?*” By reading, rereading, and coding the data, I aimed to identify similarities and differences within and across interviews to generate initial themes. These themes were reviewed against the transcriptions before they were named and defined. The analytical process was recursive, moving back and forth between the phases of analysis - reading the data, coding, and developing, reviewing, and naming themes.

I aimed at analyzing the data inductively. This is, however, not entirely possible as who I am, and how I interpret and understand the content of the focus group interviews, contribute to the construction of meaning. I am a Ph.D. Candidate in science of professions, with extended experience with supporting families in need of support from different welfare services. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, I have endeavored to be aware of how this background and experience has affected the analytical process. To reduce bias, and ensure quality in the study, I have throughout the research process written a research diary to reflect upon my role as a researcher and how this might have affected the research. I have also co-read parts of the data, and repeatedly discussed the data and the on-going analysis with the supervisors of the Ph.D. project. Thus, the internal validity of the findings and analysis was negotiated, reviewed, and discussed throughout the analytical process.

3. Findings

This section is organized according to the identified themes and connected to the stated research question. In the analytical process, the following themes were developed: 1) *It is not like we use the word “emotional abuse,”* 2) *Emotional abuse is related to emotional care,* 3) *Taking a child’s perspective on emotional abuse,* and 4) *Emotional abuse is part of a complex situation.* The focus group interviews were not characterized by disagreements, but rather involved reflections mirroring the headings of the different themes. Accordingly, the findings of this study are both illustrated with longer quotations to ensure an in-depth description of the findings as well as with short excerpts to illuminate the breadth of the themes. These excerpts were translated from Norwegian to English when writing up the findings.

3.1. It's not like we use the word “emotional abuse”

The first theme focuses on how child welfare workers find EA to be a diffuse, intangible, and unfamiliar concept. It further illuminates delicate considerations of which terms and language to use to ensure collaboration for the best interest of the child, at the same time using a language that is clear and possible for parents to understand.

The results reveal that the focus group interviews mainly began with the child welfare workers emphasizing EA as a diffuse, unfamiliar, and intangible concept. The participants' descriptions focused on how they found EA challenging to “put into words” and how they lacked the words for describing what EA is: “It is diffuse, and many of us lack words to describe what it is and what happens.” As indicated by the following quote, EA is acknowledged as a phenomenon that they, as child welfare workers, encounter in their daily work: “We wade in it on a daily basis, but suddenly you need to think about and express what it really is.” In addition to recognizing EA of children as a frequent phenomenon in child welfare work, this quotation indicates that the child welfare workers find it difficult to articulate their knowledge regarding EA, and that it is challenging to give simple descriptions of such complex concepts in which child welfare workers deals with in their everyday work.

Overall, the participants in the focus groups argued that they have not engaged in conversations on EA as a topic before and are clear about not using the word EA in their work: “It is not like we use the word emotional abuse. We talk more about what it is.” This is elaborated by another participant stating, “It is more about explaining it, how it affects the child when you do this or that, and we elaborate more on the concrete examples.” These expressions shed light upon how child welfare workers are less concerned about labelling or defining parental behavior, or children's experiences, as EA. Rather, they are concerned with attempting to help parents understand how specific situations affect their child.

When reflecting upon the concept of EA, the child welfare workers tend to focus on parents' ability to provide emotional care for their children. Rather than labelling children's experiences that might be emotionally or psychologically harmful for children as EA,

they use terms like "emotional care." However, across the focus group interviews, the participants discussed how terms like "emotional care" can be perceived as diffuse and unfamiliar as EA, and accordingly not easier for parents to understand or for professionals to explain and describe: "I see it when we conclude, you know, that we rather write 'lack of emotional care'. But this is also a concept which is diffuse and hard to explain and conceptualize."

In addition to preferring the use of more neutral terms, such as emotional care, because EA is an unfamiliar term for the parents, several child welfare workers also describe that they assume that parents might perceive the term "emotional abuse" as being scary: "using the word abuse, in general, is very scary, and a lot are not familiar with that, because they perceive abuse as hitting." Related to this, the participants in two focus groups discussed how they need to negotiate and balance which words they use to reach an alliance and build positive relationships with the parents, thereby aiming to collaborate with them to help the child:

Whose language is it that we use? Ours or theirs? They who are receiving the help? We don't necessarily make it smaller by using other words, but maybe we make it more 'eatable' to reach an alliance which leads to children feeling better.

Through this expression, the child welfare worker reflects on the importance of awareness of how the language they choose potentially affects their collaboration with the family. Contrary to this, child welfare workers across the focus groups emphasize the need for them to be aware of terms such as EA, their responsibility to know how the terms they use differ, and to be aware of how EA is defined, understood, and how it affects children. Across the focus groups, a few child welfare workers argue that using the term EA may help parents to understand more clearly what child welfare workers are concerned about and it may also help them provide more concrete help to the families.

3.2. Emotional abuse is related to emotional care

As demonstrated in the first theme, the child welfare workers describe EA as diffuse, intangible, unfamiliar, and a word they rarely use. However, the second theme reveals that when given the opportunity to reflect upon EA, the participants provided varied and nuanced descriptions of the concept. Overall, the findings reveal that the child welfare workers described EA as an unsafe environment in the family and as patterns of parental behavior that are harmful for the child. The findings further illuminate how the child welfare workers described that EA is related to emotional care and how they perceive EA and emotional neglect as part of the holistic emotional care a child receives.

Across the focus groups, there are a few variations in terms of how EA is described. In two focus groups, the participants describe EA to be related to the relationships in the family, and that EA is about "creating a fear in the home." These short excerpts indicate that EA affects the relationships in the family, and that experiences of EA create fear for the children. This is elaborated in the following example: "I think emotional abuse is about an unsafe environment in the family, which creates a fundamental insecurity for children." This statement illuminates how experiences with EA might cause feelings of insecurity and unsafety in children.

In addition to describing EA based on the environment in the family, the child welfare workers describe EA based on specific parental behaviors. They describe a range of behaviors that might comprise EA. Across the focus groups, the child welfare workers include parental behavior that is both actively harmful and parental absence of warmth and support when describing EA. This is illuminated in the following utterance:

I think it (EA) is connected to emotional care or emotional care competence. If you are not sensitive enough or don't interpret your children's need for comfort, being seen, heard, or feeling understood, then the child feels rejected or that they have no value or that they don't matter. But it might be easier to think about the harder, strong expressions like children being threatened, violated, or manipulated.

In addition to including a variety of behaviors in EA, this quotation sheds light upon how it might be easier to focus on the strong, or actively harmful, expressions like threats, violations, and manipulations than children's need for comfort and understanding. This child welfare worker also connects EA to emotional care or emotional care competence. As indicated in the previous theme, emotional care appears to be a more familiar and preferred term by the participants. When child welfare workers discuss EA, they tend to focus on parents' ability to provide emotional care for their children. When they assess children's emotional care as inadequate, several child welfare workers describe that they would say or write for example: "this is not sufficient emotional care of the child," rather than labelling children's experiences that might be emotionally or psychologically harmful for them as EA.

In the discussions of EA, several child welfare workers questioned the relationship between EA and emotional neglect. There were a few variations in how this relationship was perceived. Some child welfare workers separated these two concepts and said, for example, that "emotional neglect is some kind of passivity, while emotional abuse is a more active way of being." Others perceived EA and emotional neglect to be closely connected and reflected upon them as "parts of the holistic emotional care you receive as a child."

3.3. Taking a child's perspective on emotional abuse

The third theme is closely related to the second, as it illuminates how child welfare workers emphasize taking a child's perspective on EA as well as the importance of promoting the voice and the perspective of the child when working with EA.

When describing EA, a few participants express that regardless of the cause and the context of the abuse, it is illegal. They further discuss that emotionally abusive parental acts are illegal despite the potential consequences of such acts for the children. Yet, several child welfare workers indicate that this is challenging, because children experience specific, and similar, situations differently. The participants also describe challenges with evaluating when certain parental acts are simply a parenting style, or parental practice, and

when the behaviors should be regarded as EA. In this regard, several child welfare workers describe that parental behavior might be considered emotionally abusive when it is a persistent pattern or repeated behavior that causes harm to the child's development: "I think it is about repeated episodes, when it impacts children's life and harm."

Across the focus groups, the child welfare workers emphasized the importance of adopting a child's perspective when working with EA:

It is saying to, or about the child, "the child is so hopeless," this is "not possible," and expressing that everything is difficult and wrong with the child. When children experience this, they adopt it as their perception of themselves. I really think about how it affects the child's self-esteem and self-image.

As this example indicates, child welfare workers are concerned with taking a child's perspective when describing EA. It also sheds light upon the severe damage that EA might do to the children. Regardless of whether the child welfare workers describe EA based on parental behavior, relationships, or family environment, as described in the second theme, they all emphasized the consequences of experiences with EA on children's feelings of not being wanted, loved, and good enough. They often do this by including how the parental acts affect the child: "It is neglect. Rejection, mockery, sarcasm, irony. It is about whatever you do as a child, it is not good enough."

The participants are consistent when describing EA as harmful for the children. Contrary to this, they discuss and reflect upon their uncertainties of how to evaluate and assess EA and how it harms the child: "It is hard to assess; when is enough, enough? What is too much emotional abuse, right? With physical abuse, it is easier to draw a line, but with emotional abuse, it is a harder assessment, I think." This quote illuminates how the child welfare workers face a balancing act when it comes to assessing how severe a situation is for a child. It also illuminates how the child welfare workers emphasized that they are more used to, or have more experience with, making explicit and justified assessments of physical abuse than EA. Regarding this, the child welfare workers emphasized the importance of having repeated conversations with children to encourage children to share their perspectives and to improve the opportunity to identify children's experiences with EA. A child welfare worker expressed, "We need to keep promoting children's voice and perspectives. We need to get better at giving the children a voice." In relation to this, a few child welfare workers reflect upon how they will not understand children's statements and experiences as EA if they are not aware of EA as a concept and a concern in the family: "We can have as many conversations with children as we want, but if we are not aware of EA, we will never identify it."

3.4. Emotional abuse is part of a complex situation

The last theme centers around the fact that EA is frequently one element in a complex situation in the families in need of support from the CWS. The findings focus on how EA is rarely the main concern in the family but is rather considered an overlapping and underlying element of other forms of child abuse. The theme also sheds light upon the idea that child welfare workers might be less aware of EA than for example physical abuse, and that they unconsciously perceive EA as less serious than physical abuse.

Further, the child welfare workers mainly acknowledge EA to be frequent among children in need of support from CWS. Additionally, they describe that "emotional abuse rarely comes alone," and that "I think that it's rare that we see emotional abuse as a single element, as the only thing a child experiences in the family." These expressions shed light on how participants meet families with complex problems and that EA is considered one element of the complexity. The participants further discuss that this complexity might constrain the level of awareness of EA among child welfare workers: There are so many elements we investigate when it comes to a child's physical and emotional care, so I am very unsure about how aware we are about what we investigate at what time. Another participant mentions, "I think we do not think concretely about emotional abuse in our work. It's not like we dive into this concept and think about what it does with a child and what help the parents in these cases' needs." In these two expressions, the child welfare workers describe how the complexity in child welfare cases affects their awareness of what they focus on at what time. In the latter quote, the child welfare worker also describes how EA is an element they rarely work explicitly with in different phases of child welfare work. Particularly, in two focus groups, the child welfare workers discuss that if they are to write about EA, the descriptions need to be clear and obvious:

If we write the word emotional abuse, we need to have clear descriptions about what it is. Before we write that we assess that children have experienced physical and emotional abuse the description is very clear, and obvious. Then maybe we use the word. But if not, we rarely use the term.

In this quote, the child welfare worker illuminates how EA needs to be clearly expressed before they write or use the word EA. This is elaborated on in the following example:

In cases where the emotional abuse has been extremely severe, it is so clear that it is emotional abuse, and then it is easier to thematize it throughout the investigation, when we conclude and how we describe how this is not consistent with being a caregiver for a child. But in these cases, it is so obvious that it is emotionally abusive behavior. It kind of flashes in our faces. But it is a shame that the other cases, where emotional abuse is not as visible, where we are not able to describe it, the emotional abuse just continues. If we had stopped maybe, taken the time. Maybe we would have seen it then?

This example illuminates how child welfare workers tend to be more aware of EA as part of the complexity in the family if EA is perceived as severe and obvious. It also illuminates that the more concretely the child welfare workers can describe a child's situation and experiences with EA, the clearer they can be when it comes to what support the child and family need. The abovementioned example also emphasizes that in cases in which the main concern is EA, the child welfare workers are more able to thematize it

throughout their work. Simultaneously, the expressions shed light on how EA may remain a silent part of the complexity in cases in which EA is not the main concern of the case. Lastly, the child welfare workers reflect upon how they might have considered EA as an inherent aspect in the family if they have had the time to reflect and think when working with such complex cases.

In the discussion on EA and the complex situations in the families in need of support from the CWS, the child welfare workers often discuss EA in relation to other forms of child abuse:

We divide it into physical abuse, sexual abuse, EA and neglect, but is it possible not to experience EA if you experience physical abuse? Something emotional about it, right? It does something with your emotions being violated like that, whether it is physical or emotional.

This excerpt indicates how the child welfare worker shares knowledge regarding how child abuse and maltreatment can be operationalized, and how EA is described to co-exist, in particular, with physical abuse. The participants are consistent when describing how EA is as harmful as, or even more harmful, than physical abuse. Throughout the interviews, the child welfare workers also began to question whether EA is an underlying element of physical abuse. In this regard, the child welfare workers describe how their concern with having evidence and documenting the circumstances around a child might affect their awareness on EA. The child welfare workers in the focus groups further describe how this might lead to them being more concerned with physical abuse, as this is perceived to be more concrete, measurable, and possible to make evidence of. This is illuminated in the following expression:

I have met children saying that, if I just knew what makes them so angry that they hit, I would stop. And again, we get concerned with how often the parents hit, right. Rather than listening to what the children actually say. I think we do that, listen, and take that into account in a holistic assessment of the child's care situation. But I do not think we document it well, and in a way that it is possible to illuminate in court, or in the social welfare board. We need to be clearer on the written part when it comes to emotional abuse, I think.

This expression sheds light on how the attention of child welfare workers tends to focus on the concrete and measurable manner in what the children say and how their expressions on experiences with EA may not be focused on. This expression also illustrates that they consider the children's emotions and concerns in their holistic assessments of the children's situation, but that these considerations are rarely elaborated on or described clearly in their written documentation. This child welfare worker also describes how this aspect makes it challenging to utilize written documentation regarding whether the child's situation should be illuminated in the social welfare board. In these discussions, the child welfare workers reflect upon how this lacking documentation may lead to EA being underreported, under-communicated, and underestimated:

Emotional abuse is under reported, it is more visible with bruises, and the emotional abuse is more diffuse. We write about it, but it is much easier to get sympathy, and attention on the bruises, rather than children who have experienced a lot of conflicts and abuse in the home. Yelling, anger and aggression. I am afraid it gets under communicated, and underestimated what it means. For the children you know...

The above quotation illuminates how a child welfare worker reflects upon how child welfare workers might under-report, under-communicate, and underestimate how experiences of EA harm children. The quotation also indicates that EA is perceived as being less serious than physical abuse.

4. Discussion

The present study explores how Norwegian child welfare workers describe and understand EA of children. Overall, this study reveals that the nature of EA was unfamiliar to the child welfare workers, and that there is a low level of knowledge and awareness regarding EA among the participants. Like previous research, EA is in this study, perceived as difficult to explain and conceptualize, name and address (Iwaniec et al., 2007; North, 2022). Additionally, it is found that the child welfare workers are unfamiliar with EA, as it is a concept that they rarely discuss and reflect upon both with colleagues, other professionals, parents and children. Even though EA was unfamiliar to the child welfare workers, and they found it difficult to talk about, they clearly expressed their knowledge of EA when given the opportunity to reflect upon it and direct their attention to it. Accordingly, the findings show that the low level of knowledge and awareness of EA in child welfare work is connected to each other, in terms of knowledge creating awareness and opposite. This study, thus, demonstrates a need for reflection among child welfare workers about their awareness and knowledge of EA, to enable and create new insights, perspectives and expanded understandings of the concept.

In line with the child-centric values in the Norwegian CWS, this study demonstrates that child welfare workers hold children's perspectives and narratives on their own situation in high regard when it comes to making assessments about the child's situation. This is particularly important in the work with EA, since its impact is difficult to observe and understand, and that it is challenging to investigate which aspects of abuse children feel most strongly (Iwaniec et al., 2006; North, 2022). The analysis indicates that the participants are principally concerned with the emotional care children receive, and how harm may be caused to the emotional development of children. This relates to the values, beliefs and norms of child-rearing and parenting practices in Norway, all of which strongly emphasize children's emotions and the extent to which they feel safe and receive sufficient emotional care (Fævelen et al., 2023). However, as EA is evident from the quality of the relationships and interactions between parents and children and has severe consequences for children's feelings of being safe and loved, it is somewhat surprising that EA was such an unfamiliar concept among the participants in this study. Moreover, the study shows that children's experiences with EA are rarely interpreted and labelled as that, but rather connected to concepts as emotional care. The study, thus, emphasizes the importance of strengthening child welfare workers

knowledge and awareness about EA in relation to related concepts, to enable them to more effectively identify, name and address EA.

This study demonstrates that emotional care is a term the child welfare workers prefer when communicating with parents. By replacing the term EA with emotional care, they frame their conversations with parents in a way they perceive less scary to manage the challenges and complexity of child welfare work. The findings indicate that this framing may lead to trivializing children's experiences with EA, and to misconceptions about the severity of the situation. This may offer fewer opportunities to the child welfare workers to name and address the abuse, but also it may lead to implementation of measures that are not adjusted or tailored to the individual child and family's situation. In sum, the analysis indicated that the focus on and knowledge of emotional care in the context of Norwegian child welfare work, has the potential to overshadow the knowledge and understanding of concepts such as EA, even though this has a clear connection to the ideals of parenting practice in the Norwegian society. Accordingly, the study demonstrates the need to improve child welfare workers ability to skillfully communicate with parents about EA, to be able to be more clear about their concerns, and strengthen decision making processes in cases of abuse and violence in order to providing sufficient help and support.

When the child welfare workers describe EA, they include both the actively harmful behaviors of parents, and the absence of parental warmth and support in their understanding of EA. This corresponds with the conceptualization of EA by Hart et al. (2018), as outlined earlier in this article. The study further demonstrates that EA is understood as overlapping with other forms of abuse, and as an invisible aspect of the complexity in a child's experiences of abuse and maltreatment. Moreover, the child welfare workers highly acknowledge the severe potential harmful effects of children's experiences with EA and that many of the children they meet have such experiences. When discussing EA, the child welfare workers are more focused on the difficulties of clarifying the potential risk of harm, rather than focusing on the level of support the families need, which relates to the risk-oriented approach in child welfare work (Adananes & Syrstad, 2021; Christiansen et al., 2019). The child welfare workers, further, clearly express their uncertainties according to making assessments and decisions on when parental behaviors are considered EA and when these experiences are harmful for children. Like previous research, the findings demonstrate that assessing children's care situation is particularly challenging when working with EA, since a professional consensus has not been reached on what constitutes emotionally abusive and neglectful behaviors (Munro, 2020; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011).

The difficulties of reaching a consensus about EA, challenges the zero-tolerance ideal against abuse and violence in Norway, as it is hard to be clear about what to prevent and what to protect children from. The intangible and invisible nature of EA, further, makes it difficult to conceptualize, document and make evidence of EA, as also demonstrated in previous research (Iwaniec et al., 2006; Iwaniec et al., 2007; North, 2022). Moreover, the study demonstrates that EA is underreported, under-communicated, and underestimated, and that the focus and awareness of child welfare workers tend to aim against physical abuse which they understand as easier to define, and as more concrete and measurable than EA. As outlined, EA has received sparse attention both in research and policy (e.g., Brassard et al., 2020; Kloppen et al., 2015; Kojan et al., 2020), and this study indicate that this is reflected also in Norwegian child welfare work. An overly focus on the physical aspects of abuse, has the potential of trivializing children's experiences of EA, and cause inaccurate decisions regarding children's care situations. Accordingly, the study disclose a need for an explicit focus on EA as both a standalone form for abuse, and as an overlapping and underlying element in other forms of abuse and violence to support child welfare workers in their decision-making in cases of abuse and violence. This is crucial when it comes to trying to understand the complex nature of EA, as well as understanding the complexity of children's experiences with abuse and violence. It, thus, has the potential to strengthen professional discretion and decision-making processes regarding the level of support children and families are in need of.

4.1. Limitations of the study

Despite this study shedding light on Norwegian child welfare workers' descriptions and understanding of EA of children, this study has limitations. First, one limitation of the study could be linked to how the study was conducted in a small set of child welfare offices and that the descriptions and understanding of EA of children discussed in this article does not necessarily represent the overall descriptions and understanding of EA of children among Norwegian child welfare workers. Second, in the search for patterns in the data my role as a researcher might have affected which patterns and interpretations I pursued. I have, however, struggled to reduce bias and strengthened the quality of the study as described in an earlier section of this article. Third, the study included both online and in-person focus group interviews. Challenges with online interviews were considered when deciding on the usability of the digital platforms. The digital interviews aimed at providing the participants with sufficient space and time to talk, facilitating the discussion with careful attention, and being sensitive to facial expressions and the available body language of the participants.

5. Conclusion and implications for practice

In conclusion, this study brings to light how the concept of EA is unfamiliar, and that there is a low level of knowledge and awareness regarding EA among child welfare workers. The study argues that children's experiences with EA are being trivialized to maintain good relations with parents, and that child welfare workers deal with a balancing act when it comes to attending to the needs of the child and collaborating with parents. Accordingly, the study demonstrates a need for child welfare workers to develop their skills in addressing and communicating about EA with parents to manage their complex work with this concept more effectively. Furthermore, the study argue for the need of reflections and discussions among child welfare workers regarding their awareness of EA, and how they investigate, emphasize, assess, and work with the quality of family relationships and interactions, parental behavior, and children's experiences illuminated by the concept of EA. Such discussions have the potential to enhance the abilities of child welfare workers to describe, communicate about, and document EA. Furthermore, the study has the potential to argue that the current

approaches, the prevailing knowledge base and ideals for parenting in the Norwegian CWS have the potential to cause a lack of awareness of EA. Accordingly, reflection about how these approaches, knowledge bases and ideals have implications for how child welfare workers connect and classify a concrete situation to a professional understanding of cases of abuse and violence, is central to strengthen professional discretion in child welfare work with EA.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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Ness, S. & Paulsen, V. Emotional abuse, an invisible aspect in Norwegian child welfare documentation. *Under review for publication.*

Emotional abuse, an invisible aspect in Norwegian child welfare documentation

Abstract

This article explores how emotional abuse (EA) is described and considered in Norwegian child welfare documents. A document analysis inspired by a qualitative content analysis of 12 documents based in the Norwegian Child Welfare Act (1992) §4-4,6 and §4-12 was conducted. The findings show that EA is vaguely and limitedly elaborated on, unless the child has clear descriptions of EA. Children's expressions about abuse and violence are highly emphasized in child welfare assessments. The findings demonstrate that the terminology related to EA is shifting, often being translated into the overall concept of "violence" when assessing children's experiences with abuse and violence. The documents make general rather than individual assessments by using generalized knowledge of the severe consequences that abuse and violence pose for children. The article concludes with a need for specific awareness and knowledge about EA to gain nuanced insights into the complexities and subtleties of children's experiences with abuse and violence. This might enable child welfare workers to skillfully communicate about and include EA in child welfare documents when making balanced considerations and justifications about the right help and support for children with experiences with EA.

Key words: emotional abuse, psychological abuse, child welfare documents, professional discretion, accountability

Introduction

Child welfare documents can ensure openness, clarity, and transparency by including descriptions of assessments and justifications of decisions made in child welfare work. Including this information can strengthen professional discretion and accountability in child welfare work (Caspersen & Paulsen, 2019). The Norwegian Child Welfare Services (CWS), however, are criticized because their documents lack such assessments and justifications, failing to provide essential information of children's views and how these are weighed in the decision (Fjeld et al., 2020; Office of the Auditor General of Norway, 22–23, The Norwegian Board of Health Supervision, 2019). Such a lack of documentation poses both juridical and ethical challenges because children's legal security and requirements of contradiction are not met. The lack of balanced assessments and justifications also has consequences for understanding why specific measures were initiated and why decisions were made (Bjørnbekk & Mevik, 2023; Office of the Auditor General of Norway, 22–23).

With the criticism of child welfare documentation paying attention to child participation, lines of reasoning and decision-making processes, the present study analyses documents aiming to explore how EA is described and considered in child welfare documents. We argue that it is important to have a specific focus on EA in child welfare work and research because preventing and protecting children from all forms of maltreatment are a core mandate in CWS (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). Still, EA has gained sparse attention in research, policy, and practice (Brassard, 2019; Kojan et al., 2020; Ottosen et al., 2020). EA is also challenging to understand, yet it is considered both a standalone form of maltreatment, as well as an underlying component of other forms of maltreatment such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and children experiencing domestic abuse and violence (Hart et al., 2018). It is also argued to be the most pervasive and harmful form of child maltreatment (Brassard, 2019; Felitti et al., 2019; Stolthenborgh et al., 2015).

The current study is part of a more comprehensive Ph.D. project exploring how EA is understood in child welfare work. The findings show that there is a low degree of knowledge and awareness of EA in child welfare work (Ness, 2023a; Ness, 2023b). Like previous research, the findings from this project show that the terminology, operationalization, definition, and interpretation of the concept EA vary between and within countries, cultures, and professions (Kloppen et al., 2015; Ness, 2023a; Ottosen, 2020). These variations may constrain child welfare workers' awareness of EA and how they engage and intervene with EA in cases of abuse and violence (Ness, 2023a). Child welfare workers also find it hard to describe and conceptualize this form of abuse, they rarely use the word EA when communicating with parents or in written documentation, and they consider EA challenging to document and gather evidence of (Ness, 2023b). This corresponds with earlier studies disclosing that the nature of EA is challenging in child welfare work because it is perceived as invisible and intangible, thus making it challenging for child welfare workers to understand, name, address, identify, investigate, document, and assess (Aadnanes, 2020; lawaniec et al., 2006; lawaniec et al., 2007, Ness, 2023b, North, 2022). The current study provides complementary insights on how EA is understood in child welfare work by exploring the following research question: *How is EA described and considered in child welfare documents?*

We have chosen to use the term *emotional abuse* to describe what, in Norway, refers to as emotional and/or psychological violence. In English, abuse refers to verbal harassment, which is described as a core element of EA, as well as “psychological violence.” By using the term abuse, we want to encourage a broad understanding of violence (Macy et al., 2021). We further use the term EA to create conceptual coherence between EA and emotional neglect. These two concepts are understood as elements in the broader term “emotional (or psychological) maltreatment,” like the following definition we lean on:

a repeated pattern or extreme incident(s) of caretaker behavior that thwarts the child's basic psychological needs (e.g., safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, respect) and convey a child is worthless, defective, damaged goods, unloved, unwanted, endangered, primarily useful in meeting another's needs, and/or expandable (Hart et al., 2018, p. 147)

In this understanding, EA is actively harmful behavior (commission), while emotional neglect is the absence of emotional warmth (omission) (Hart et al., 2018). Hart et al. (2018) further operationalizes emotional maltreatment into six areas: 1) spurning; 2) terrorizing; 3) exploiting/corrupting; 4) emotional unresponsiveness; 5) isolating and 6) mental health, medical, and educational neglect. Areas 1, 2, 3, and 5 address EA, while the other two areas (4 and 6) address emotional neglect (Ottosen et al., 2020). Children who experience domestic abuse and violence are considered EA and included in terrorizing (Hart et al., 2018). The present study focuses on EA, but the similar characteristics of EA and emotional neglect make it hard to distinguish children's experiences with these two concepts both in literature and in child welfare work (Hart et al., 2018; Ottosen et al., 2020).

Child Welfare Services, documents, and professional discretion

Child welfare work is generally situated in a complex landscape with dilemmas and paradoxes, in which there is a zero-tolerance norm against all forms of child abuse and violence. This norm has become common knowledge in Norway and indicates that all forms of abuse and violence are harmful to children, regardless of the form and degree of the abuse or violence (Aadnanes, 2020). Such a norm and understanding, however, requires a clear definition of what abuse is and is not, which is challenging with EA, because there is no professional consensus on what comprises emotionally abusive and neglectful behaviors (Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). There are variations and discrepancies in how professionals and laypeople define and understand abuse and violence, which complicate child welfare work (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2018; Calheiros et al., 2016). In this way, child welfare workers deal with an ambiguous

concept, finding it hard to describe and conceptualize EA and because they find it challenging to assess the boundaries between inadequate parenting and emotionally abusive behavior (Ness, in review; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). Thus, child welfare work with EA requires a high degree of professional discretion (Molander, 2016), and the mentioned challenges potentially have implications for the descriptions and considerations of EA in child welfare documents.

Professional discretion includes applying generalized and abstract knowledge in specific situations to make individual assessments and decisions (Abbott, 1988). It is a reasoning process in which child welfare workers use specific professional knowledge with the aim of connecting (colligation) and classifying (classification) a concrete situation to a professional understanding of the problem (Abbott, 1988). Colligation further refers to the process of selecting relevant information using relevant theories and concepts to assemble a credible and “followable” account of a child’s situation (Abbott, 1988). During this process, child welfare workers limit complexity by considering professional knowledge, common sense, legislation while preparing for a formal classification of the problem. This account, assessments, and justifications of the decisions made throughout this process should be included in child welfare documents to show the complexity of children’s experiences with abuse and violence. This would ensure transparency, which can strengthen professional discretion and (Caspersen & Paulsen, 2019). According to Molander (2013), accountability refers to not only child welfare workers’ responsibility to inform and explain their work, but also the responsibility to justify the assessments and decisions made.

Child welfare documents are written within certain structures, such as child welfare legislation, as well as the mandate, intentions, and governmental guidelines for the Norwegian CWS. The content is based on theoretical and personal knowledge and experience. Such structures and knowledge are in play when the child welfare workers specify problem(s) and describe the child’s care situation, using child welfare vocabulary and narrowing down the options available for action. In this way, the

structures and knowledge surrounding child welfare work shape the professional discretion of child welfare workers.

The Norwegian CWS are regulated by the Child Welfare Act (2021) and the aim is to ensure appropriate help and care at the right time for children and young people who live in circumstances that potentially may harm their health and development (the Child Welfare Act, 2021). Thus, the mandate is twofold: prevent abuse and neglect by supporting families and protect children from maltreatment by taking coercive and compulsory action (Falch-Eriksen & Skivenes, 2019). The Norwegian CWS is often described as service and family oriented because it prioritizes voluntary and preventive measures in the home and has a high threshold for implementing compulsory measures (Gilbert et al., 2011; Pösö et al., 2014; Skivenes & Søvig, 2017). Decisions on compulsory measures are based on court orders made by the County Social Welfare Boards (the Child Welfare Act, 2021). Despite the service and family orientation, the Norwegian CWS is increasingly described as having a risk-oriented approach with a specific focus on the deficits of parents and children (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Ellingsen et al., 2019; Feyling & Øfsti, 2023). This approach relates to the protection mandate of child welfare because it aims to prevent the potential risk that children may be exposed to, now or in the future (Feyling & Øfsti, 2023). However, this approach is criticized because it leads the CWS to be more concerned with clarifying the risk for abuse rather than families' need for support (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Backe-Hansen et al., 2017; Christiansen et al., 2019). Because of the twofold mandate of the Norwegian CWS, child welfare workers are expected to both investigate whether the child is exposed to risk, as well as establish a collaboration with the families to provide sufficient help. This makes child welfare work with abuse and violence complex, complicated, and challenging (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003).

The Norwegian CWS is additionally described as being characterized by an individual orientation, which affects both how social problems are defined, and what measures

are available in the system (Røkkum et al., 2022). Despite a family and service orientation in the Norwegian CWS, the measures are often separately aimed at children and parents (Røkkum, 2022). The problems children encounter is often, in the Norwegian CWS, justified in parental lack of normative parenting competencies, and a central feature is to provide services aiming at improving parental competencies (Hennum, 2016). The measures initiated should further be founded in the ‘best interest of the child’ (the Child Welfare Act, 2021). The individual orientation in the Norwegian CWS relate to the strong child-centric values in the Norwegian CWS (Hennum, 2016; Røkkum et al., 2022). Children are perceived as individuals with their own interests and rights, and their position in policy and legislation is strong (the Child Welfare Act, 2021). A specific mandate of child welfare workers is to include children’s perspectives by talking to the child and considering their view of the situation (the Child Welfare Act, 2021). Children’s perspectives should also be included in the written documentation to illuminate how children’s perspectives are emphasized and whether the child has had an opportunity of participating (Office of the Auditor General of Norway, 22-23). Previous research has, however, shown that Norwegian child welfare workers find it challenging to involve children and their perspectives when making assessments, that their perspectives are often not sufficiently heard before decisions are made, or are not sufficiently visible in child welfare documents (Office of the Auditor General of Norway, 22-23 Ormstad et al., 2020).

These structures and knowledge affect how child welfare workers understand children and families needing support and how they and their problems are written about (Bjørnebekk & Mevik, 2023). In this way, structures and knowledge have power because they determine which terms, language, and expressions are meaningful, along with what is considered “true” (Bjørnebekk & Mevik, 2023; Lorentzen, 2019, 2021). Based on this, we approach professional discretion and accountability through written language in the chosen child welfare documents. This lets us explore how EA is described and considered within and between the documents, allowing us to study

what structures and knowledge form the basis for the descriptions, considerations, and arguments for out-of-home care in cases that include EA.

Methods and analysis

Documents based on the Child Welfare Act (1992) §4-12 and §4-4,6 were chosen. These documents provide sufficient descriptions and assessments of children's care situations, arguing that children need to be placed in out-of-home care. These documents form the basis, providing insights into the lines of reasoning, discretion, and accountability. In line with the research question, we included the documents if EA was described as an element. To be included, the documents should be written in the period 2017–2021 to showcase the current situation. The first author approached the management of several offices to obtain these specific documents, and the final sample consisted of 12 documents from 12 case files retrieved from five child welfare offices.

The method used can be understood as “unobtrusive” because the included documents were written prior to the study and without the involvement of the researcher (Bowen, 2009). The documents, however, reflect professional and organizational standards because their audience are both the children and families they apply to and the County Social Welfare Boards, which are responsible for decision-making for out-of-home placements, both regarding §4-4,6 and §4-12 (the Child Welfare Act, 1992). The documents further coexist with other documents from the children's case files, and they are regulated within the Child Welfare Act, the convention of the rights of the child, and national guidelines and principles (Jacobsson, 2021). Through the research process, it was crucial for us to acknowledge the aim of the documents, the network of documents they exist in, their audience, and their context because it shapes how documents are written and read (Jacobsson, 2021).

The documents were analyzed by following the main steps of a qualitative content analysis, as identified by Bengtsson (2016). The analysis started with multiple readings

of the documents before developing a coding scheme to operationalize the research question. We then coded the concept of EA before coding considerations involving the concept of EA. Because the terminology related to EA was changing, we additionally coded descriptions and considerations of other forms of abuse and violence because this became relevant throughout the analysis. Information relevant for the terminology, descriptions, and considerations were subsequently extracted into the coding scheme. The extracted material was the basis for the manifest analysis of the actual concepts, descriptions, and considerations, and the coding stayed close to the text (Bengtsson, 2016).

The initial analysis was conducted by the first author before being discussed with the second author to ensure reliability and validity. When discrepancies in the coding, analysis, and interpretations arose, we discussed it until a mutual understanding was established. We further checked the codes to the original documents before we developed themes representing a more latent analysis, here seeking to find the underlying meanings of the documents (Bengtsson, 2016). These themes were also reviewed against the codes, the initial themes, the extracted data, and the documents before being defined and named. In this way, the chosen analytical approach involved moving back and forth between the manifest and latent content of the documents while reading the data, coding and developing, reviewing, and naming themes (Bengtsson, 2016; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Being driven by the data, the analytical process was inductive. Still, we as researchers contribute to the construction of meaning when we read and analyze documents as the meaning in the documents arises from our engagement with them (Prior, 2021). Who we are, and the context we read within are, thus, crucial. Our background and experience in the field of child welfare work make us competent readers, but we may not read within the same interpretive community as the documents' authors. The recursive approach to the analysis was, therefore, crucial both to illuminate the research question and maintain the quality and trustworthiness of the study.

Ethical approvals were granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, #210395) and by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir). To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the first author retrieved the documents from the child welfare offices, anonymized them, and scanned them directly into “Services for sensitive data.” The documents were only available for and organized by the first author. Even though the documents are anonymized, extracting, analyzing, and citing information from children’s lives is a balancing act. To limit the personal consequences of the document being included in the study, sensitive information about the children and their families was not extracted to address privacy issues. The focus was instead on the characteristics of child welfare workers’ descriptions and considerations of EA, aiming to extract relevant data for the stated research question and aim of the study.

Findings

The analysis and findings illuminate how child welfare workers describe and consider EA in documents based on the Child Welfare Act (1992) §4-4,6 and §4-12. Through our analysis, the following four findings were especially relevant: *1) vague descriptions and limited elaboration of EA, 2) shifting terminology, 3) generalized knowledge, and 4) children’s clear expressions about abuse and violence are highly emphasized*. The findings related to the themes will, in this section, be illustrated by excerpts from the documents. In the documents, the term “psychological violence” is used, so this term is used in the extracts. When reporting and discussing the findings, however, we follow our chosen conceptualization and terminology.

Vague descriptions and limited elaboration of emotional abuse

One of the criteria for including the documents was that EA should be described as one of the elements of the children’s care situation. These concepts are included in the documents in several ways. EA primarily is included by mentioning the term “psychological violence.” When including “psychological violence” to describe the

children's situation, the analysis shows that the term is often included by reports of concerns or from information from other professionals, such as child welfare emergency services, the "children's house," Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, public health nurses, or expressions from parents or the child, such as in the following extracts:

A meeting with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (BUP) and a doctor was held, where it was given information about the children being exposed to methods of punishment, both physical and psychological violence.

In July, the father contacted the CWS. He was concerned about the children's care situation. He said that the mother was hitting the kids and that there was physical and psychological violence against the children.

In conversations with the CWS, the boy talked about physical and psychological violence. There have been repeated serious episodes of violence over the years that the children have witnessed. It has been documented that there has been physical, psychological, and material violence.

In these extracts, the analysis indicates that the term "psychological violence" is introduced by others than CWS without further elaboration or description of what CWS counts as "psychological violence." It is unclear whether these terms are used by others or if it is specific descriptions of the child's situation that has led child welfare workers to use this term when writing the document. Even though one of the extracts says, "It's been documented that there has been physical, psychological, and material violence," none of these extracts elaborates on how this is documented, by whom, children's possible experiences with abuse and violence, or child welfare workers' understandings of what "psychological violence" is. One way of interpreting this is that child welfare workers take for granted that information by others is "true" and that they include it in the documents without an independent consideration of the concept. Another way of understanding it is that "psychological violence" is challenging to

describe and, hence, left out of the document. A third way of understanding it is that “psychological violence” is not elaborated on because the descriptions of “psychological violence” are implicit and it is taken for granted that the readers are knowledgeable of the concept. We also find that “psychological violence” is largely described alongside psychical abuse and violence. Our analysis suggests that child welfare workers might describe these forms of abuse and violence together to make visible that the child is experiencing different forms of abuse and violence, to emphasize the overlap between these forms of abuse and violence, or to underline the severity of a child’s experiences with abuse and violence.

Contrary to the vague and limited elaborations of EA, in one of the included documents, the term EA is used consistently and elaborated on throughout the document. In this document, EA is described alongside physical abuse and violence and other elements surrounding the child’s situation. The analysis, however, shows that the child seems to have clear descriptions of experiences that the child welfare worker interprets and names as “psychological violence.”

Shifting terminology

In addition to using the terms “psychological violence” and “physical abuse and violence” together in the documents, the analysis indicates that terminology related to EA is shifting. We find that, when “psychological violence” is used as a term when describing the child’s situation, it is translated into terms such as “violence,” “family violence,” “exposed to violence,” and “witnessing violence” when assessing the child’s situation. All of these terms relate to children’s experiences with abuse and violence, but they do not specify which forms of abuse and violence the child is experiencing. This shifting terminology may illustrate that child welfare workers should engage with varying terminology about abuse and violence in the literature, in policy documents and in their everyday work. It might also demonstrate that child welfare workers are not concerned with delineating between different forms of abuse and violence because they are all regarded as damaging and harmful to children. However, when

the terminology is shifting, it is unsure whether “violence” is used as a more generalized and overall term that equates different forms of abuse and violence or whether specific forms of abuse and violence range in terms of severity or possibilities of documenting and gathering evidence. Our analysis demonstrates that “violence” is often described as synonymous with physical abuse or violence and that EA gets omitted and, thus, an invisible aspect of children’s experiences with abuse and violence.

Generalized knowledge

In addition to finding that child welfare workers use “violence” as a generalized and overall term for all forms of abuse and violence, we also find that child welfare workers use generalized knowledge when making assessments about children’s experiences of abuse and violence. In the documents, this is expressed through generalized or taken-for-granted expressions and knowledge of the consequences of experiencing abuse and violence, regardless of form and the individual child’s surroundings or situation:

Witnessing violence and conflicts are serious risk factors that can cause deviant development and long-term consequences for a child. Being exposed to and witnessing violence will pose a significant risk to the boy’s further development.

Children who are exposed and subjected to violence and conflicts over time have a significantly increased risk of developing both internal and external difficulties. Based on this, the CWS assesses that the children will continue to remain significantly harmed if they remain living with their mother and father because the parents have shown that they have not been able to change their patterns of behavior in dealing with violence and conflicts.

In the above extracts, the analysis illustrates that the child welfare workers recognize the negative consequences of child abuse and violence and that this poses a risk for deviant development. In the documents, however, the child welfare workers do not delineate between different forms of violence and abuse in their assessments and

justifications. In the last extract, the child welfare workers also use generalized knowledge to justify the decision about out-of-home care but leave out an assessment directed at the specific child with experiences of abuse and violence. We find that these assessments and justifications are prevalent in the documents. These justifications are, however, characterized by being more general than individual, and the necessary considerations and reasoning are not made visible to the reader. Our analysis suggests that, by using generalized knowledge without relating it to the specific child and its situation, the professional assessments in child welfare work are at risk of becoming implicit and invisible and that it is left to the reader to make the justifications explicit.

Children's clear expressions of abuse and violence are highly emphasized

As outlined in the first theme, the term “psychological violence” is used consistently and elaborated on throughout the documents if the child has clear descriptions of experiences with EA:

The CWS also assesses that the girl has been subjected to psychological violence through threats of violence and threats to be sent out of the country (...). The girl has talked about psychological violence in which she has been spoken to derogatorily and that she has been called ugly things, and at times, she has not been spoken to at all.

This extract illustrates that the child clearly describes experiences with EA, and that the child welfare worker interprets the child's experiences as “psychological violence.” “Psychological violence” is further described and understood to include threats, humiliating communication, and rejection. Acts that relate both to the conceptualization of EA and emotional neglect are included in the child welfare workers' description of the child's experiences with EA. We further find that the child's experiences and perspectives are promoted when elaborating on experiences with “psychological violence”:

The girl has a perception that everything she did was wrong, no matter what (...). The girl also expressed that she has not received closeness, love, care, and warmth from

either her father or family. She has been clear that she has not felt welcome or felt that they cared about her. The emotional contact and care that the girl has been in need of are assessed by the CWS to have been neglected and dismissed/rejected in the way she has experienced being met, which is considered to be very concerning.

Like the previous extract, this one illuminate that a child's experiences with EA are described to include what could be understood as emotional neglect if we consider this as the absence of emotional warmth, as described in the conceptualization of the concept. The extract also shows that the lack of warmth, love, and care from the family and the child's experience of not feeling welcome or cared about are emphasized. Furthermore, the extract illustrates how the child welfare worker describes how the father's or family's lack of meeting the child's need for emotional contact and care is considered highly worrying.

In addition to emphasizing children's experiences regarding descriptions and elaborations of EA, we find that children's expressions about their experiences with abuse and violence, regardless of form, are highlighted. These expressions are, to a large extent, described and assessed as trustworthy and credible, and the child's expressions about abuse and violence are highly underscored in the assessments and justifications of decisions. The analysis demonstrates that the children's expressions about abuse and violence are assessed as credible when they are reported to several people and when the descriptions are detailed: "The boy's descriptions of the violence are detailed and, therefore, appear credible." The children's expressions further seem to be assessed as credible when the descriptions appear consistent and coincident with siblings:

The CWS assesses that the children's descriptions of abuse and neglect in the home largely coincide and places great trust in the children's explanations. The CWS considers that the children are currently very vulnerable and have significant care needs. The children have said over several years that they have been exposed to violence from their mother. Information the CWS receives gives reason to believe that the violence has

lasted over time, which is harmful to the children's personal development and safety. The mother does not acknowledge the use of violence against the children.

This excerpt illuminates that the children's expressions are assessed as credible because they have been consistent over the years. The excerpts also involve an assessment of how experiences with abuse and violence affect the children's vulnerability, along with the consequences these experiences have for children's development and safety. Such an assessment relates to the findings in the previous theme, which illuminates how child welfare workers use generalized knowledge about the consequences of abuse and violence but leave out an assessment related to the specific child. The excerpt also shows what we find prevalent in the documents: the parents' expressions about abuse and violence contradict the children's expressions about abuse and violence.

We also find that the child's credibility is related to expressions about fear and unsafety:

Over time, the girl has stood by her statements about violence from her mother, frightening statements, and threats. The CWS assesses that the girl's statements are credible and that she appears to be scared and concerned when she talks about this. The CWS considers it highly likely that she has been subjected to physical and psychological violence from her mother. The CWS have confidence in the children's descriptions of the violence. The parents' lack of acknowledgment of the violence makes it not possible to implement effective intervention measures. In the view of CWS, placing the child in out-of-home care is necessary and in the best interests of the children.

This excerpt illuminates how children's expressions of fear of their parents and insecurity in the family are emphasized when assessing the credibility of the child's expression. Our analysis finds that this is prevalent in the included documents, and the children's expressions of fear of sanctions from the parents after they told someone of

the abuse and violence are pointed out in the assessments of a child's care situation and further in the decisions made. Similar to previous excerpts in this theme, the parents' expressions on the abuse and violence contradict the child's expression. This excerpt additionally illustrates how the parents are described as refusing to recognize the abuse and violence. It further demonstrates how the parents' refusal and assessment of the child's credibility are used as opposites and, thus, as a justification of the decision of out-of-home care.

The analysis further demonstrates that children's expressions are emphasized when making assessments and decisions about where children shall continue to live, either in the family or out of home:

The girl is very clear when she says she does not want to live at home with her parents, that she feels unsafe at home, and that she's not feeling well there. The CWS assesses that the best for the girl in this situation is to have her needs acknowledged and heard and consider it very important to listen to the girl, considering her age and maturity. The girl has maintained her story with the CWS, appeared credible, and made it clear that she does not want to go home. The CWS considers that the girl's right to participation should be taken into account.

This excerpt sheds light on how the child welfare worker largely emphasizes the child's perspectives and descriptions when making a decision about out-of-home care. This excerpt further illustrates how the child welfare workers base the justification of the decision of out-of-home care on children's right to participate as related to her age and maturity, in the credibility of the child, and the expression of being unsafe at home.

Discussion

Our analysis focuses on how EA is described and considered in documents based on the Child Welfare Act (1992) §4-4,6 and §4-12. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that EA is vaguely described and limitedly elaborated on in these documents. The overall lack of descriptions and elaborations of EA may be understood in light of earlier studies

demonstrating that child welfare workers find it difficult to describe, name, and gather evidence of EA (lawaniec et al., 2006; lawaniec et al., 2007; Ness, 2023a; Ness, 2023b). It may also relate to the challenges inherent in understanding EA because there is no professional consensus about what constitutes emotionally and neglectfully behaviors (Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011), the varying understandings among professionals and lay people (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2017; Calheiro et al., 2016), and the difficulties in setting boundaries between emotionally abusive behavior that poses harm to children and inadequate parenting (Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). Even though the present study argues that the descriptions of EA are vague and limited, it also shows that EA is consistently elaborated on if the child has clear descriptions of experiences with EA. EA is described as an element of what the child is experiencing in all the included documents but elaborated on in only one of the documents. In this document, the child clearly expresses its experiences with what the child welfare worker interprets and names EA. Thus, the current study indicates that, when EA is an obvious element of the child's care situation, the child welfare workers might be able to identify it. This may suggest that, in cases where EA is a clear, standalone₂ or overlapping form of maltreatment₄, it might be identified and understood as EA. It may also suggest that, in cases where EA is an underlying element of another form of abuse and violence it is a risk that the child's experiences with EA are not identified, hence affecting the decisions about help and support adjusted to the specific child's needs. Being able to identify and understand children's experiences with EA corresponds with previous research indicating that a low degree of knowledge and awareness of EA in child welfare work affects how child welfare workers understand, engage₂ and intervene in cases of EA (Ness, 2023a; Ness, 2023b).

The lack of descriptions and elaborations of EA can be seen as a result of shifting terminology and generalized knowledge related to EA and abuse and violence in general. The present study demonstrates how different forms of violence and abuse are translated into the more overall or generalized term “violence” when assessing children's experiences with abuse and violence. Similar to previous research, it also

discloses that child welfare documents are characterized by using generalized or common knowledge about the negative consequences of children's experiences with abuse and violence (Storhaug et al., 2022). Using this kind of terminology and knowledge may be an attempt to simplify the complexity of children's experiences of abuse and violence to enable the child welfare worker to assemble a credible and "followable" account of the child's situation, which refers to the colligation process in professional discretion (Abbott, 1988). The generalized knowledge about how all forms of abuse and violence are harmful to children, regardless of form and degree, is related to the zero-tolerance norm against all forms of abuse and violence in Norway (Aadnanes, 2020). This knowledge is also based on research and, hence, is considered scientific knowledge. However, using such an overall and generalized terminology and knowledge, thus understanding of abuse and violence, when describing and assessing children's experiences with abuse and violence potentially leads child welfare workers to equate children's experiences with different forms of abuse, failing to illuminate the breadth of children's experiences with abuse and violence. This again may lead to misconceptions about the severity of the situations, which illuminates how the terminology and knowledge used in the documents have power because the terminology and knowledge included in the documents conveys to the readers what terms, language, expressions, and experiences are meaningful and considered "true" experiences by the author (Bjørnebekk & Mevik, 2023). Thus, the present study suggests that, by using generalized terminology and knowledge about children's experiences with abuse and violence, their experiences with EA are omitted from the documents and in this way not described nor considered part of their experiences.

In addition to demonstrating vagueness when describing children's experiences with abuse and violence, the current study demonstrates how generalized knowledge affects the assessments and justifications of decisions. Using generalized knowledge when assessing a child's care situation leads child welfare workers to make general, rather than individual, assessments of children's care situations. This is also pointed out by the European Court of Human Rights (2019a, 2019b) when describing that the

Norwegian CWS use of generalized knowledge in assessing the impact certain experiences have on the child. Such general assessments are further characterized by vagueness and implicitness, leaving it to the reader to make the justifications explicit and followable. Regarding the child welfare workers' assessments, children's expressions about not only EA, but also abuse and violence, are highly emphasized and given great weight in the considerations. This is in line with the child-centered approach in the Norwegian CWS, underlining the strong position children have in policy and legislation (the Child Welfare Act, 2021). Similar to the criticism of child welfare documentation, these expressions are not elaborated on or part of an integral consideration of the children's care situation. When placing weight on the children's voices alone, it is a risk that the decision is perceived as the child's responsibility rather than the CWS responsibility to include children's voices in the integral assessment of the situation. In this way, the present study demonstrates that the purposes of professional discretion and accountability are not reached as individual assessments nor balanced considerations are included. Neither is the child welfare workers' responsibility to justify the assessments and decisions made in the specific cases, thus challenging the accountability of CWS decisions (Molander, 2013, 2020).

Limitations of the study

First, a limitation is that this is a qualitative study based on a limited number of documents and Norwegian child welfare offices. The analysis is based on what is written in specific documents by specific child welfare workers and does not necessarily represent the overall descriptions and considerations of EA in Norwegian CWS. The current study does not attempt to generalize, but the findings are consistent within the sample. Second, the chosen terminology and conceptualization of EA might be considered a limitation. Translations of terminology and adaptations of conceptualizations and definitions of concepts such as EA are not unproblematic because they do not always refer to the same phenomenon. To increase the validity and reliability of the study, we have provided an account for our choices regarding

terminology and conceptualization. However, we respect other terminology and conceptualizations and recognize that the selected terms and definitions have limitations while aiming to include a recognizable conceptualization both in the national and international context. Third, focusing on this specific form of abuse and violence has the potential to not acknowledge the complexity described in the documents as surrounding children. Nevertheless, in the introduction and throughout the article, we have argued the importance of having a specific focus on EA. Finally, the present study relates to the Norwegian CWS and its specific characteristics. The findings, however, can be relevant in other child welfare systems because of the variations in how EA is understood, along with how other child welfare systems also aim at protecting children from all forms of abuse and violence.

Conclusion and implications for research and practice

The descriptions and considerations of EA in the documents reflect previous research on the challenges inherent in naming and addressing EA, the current child-centered approach in the Norwegian CWS, and the use of generalized knowledge about the negative consequences of experiencing violence and abuse, both when describing and assessing children's experiences with abuse and violence. The current study demonstrates a need for more specific awareness and knowledge about EA so that child welfare workers can skillfully describe and communicate about children's experiences with EA. This may increase child welfare workers' possibilities of being clearer in their descriptions and considerations about EA both in conversations and in child welfare documents. It can also facilitate collaboration and a more common understanding when it comes to the concerns and arguments child welfare workers convey to parents. Knowledge and awareness of EA can support a better understanding of the complexity and subtleties of children's experiences with different forms of abuse, along with how they coexist. Accordingly, this may increase child welfare workers' opportunities to make balanced considerations when making assessments and justifying decisions about providing the right help and support to

children with experiences with abuse and violence. This relates both to children living in their families and those living in out-of-home care, which the documents argue for. Nuanced understandings of children's experiences with abuse and violence can help thus aiding individual assessments in addressing the needs of the child. The present study further suggests a necessity to develop writing as a relevant tool in child welfare work, addressing questions such as why specific terms according to abuse and violence are included, and others omitted, how to incorporate individual assessments and balanced considerations, how to make a holistic assessment of a specific child's situation, and how the children's expressions and credibility are taken into account in a holistic child welfare assessment of the child's situation.

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The aim of this thesis is to deepen understanding, expand knowledge, and gain nuanced insights into how emotional abuse (EA) is understood in a child welfare context. This aim is discussed within the context of child welfare work, related to the status of knowledge, theories of profession, professional discretion, the notions of conceptual and contextual coherence, and theoretical perspectives on child abuse and violence. These concepts and perspectives help to illuminate how child welfare workers organize and construct knowledge into understandings of EA.

This thesis is positioned within the qualitative research tradition and comprises three articles. The first is a scoping review of definitions and descriptions of EA in international research literature on child welfare and social work. The second explores child welfare workers descriptions and understandings of EA in focus group interviews. The third investigates how EA is described and considered in child welfare documents. Methods for data analysis include thematic synthesis, reflexive thematic analysis, and qualitative content analysis.

The findings illuminate that the knowledge base of EA is ambiguous and lacking, and that child welfare workers describe EA as an unfamiliar and diffuse concept. The findings further portray an unawareness of EA, and that child welfare workers lean on rights, norms, and values within Child Welfare Services when understanding EA. Child welfare workers further must balance different perspectives on child abuse and violence when performing their work with EA.

The thesis argues for a need for a more comprehensive and nuanced knowledge base of EA, and for professional discussions and critical reflections about how child welfare workers engage with EA. The thesis contributes to the ongoing dialogue about how to strengthen child welfare work with abuse and violence.