



Street-level policy aims of child welfare workers in England, Norway and the United States: An exploratory study



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ABSTRACT

This study, which is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a total of 92 child welfare workers in California, England and Norway conducted between January 2008 and June 2010, analyzes how child welfare workers view the principles underlying their respective child welfare system. We address this question using Lipsky's (1980) understanding of street-level bureaucracy. While we know about the policy principles of governments, we know little about how street-level bureaucrats view these principles. We call workers' perceptions of policy principles 'street-level policy aims.' We found that Norwegian street-level policy aims are child-centered and child welfare-oriented. English street-level policy aims are safety-oriented and child-centered; and U.S.-American street-level policy aims are safety-oriented and family-centered, and that in the U.S., 'permanency' was understood as family preservation. We also found that workers in Norway perceived fewer organizational barriers in implementing policy aims. We discuss the implications of these findings on future research.

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1. Introduction

Through their assessments, decisions and interventions in the lives of children who are at risk of maltreatment, front line child welfare workers create child welfare policy 'on the ground.' This exploratory paper compares child welfare workers' views on the principles that underlie their work in England, Norway and California (USA). For the purpose of this article, we define workers' own views and perceptions of the principles laid out by governments as 'street-level policy aims,' building on the theoretical platform developed by Michael Lipsky, in his 1980 book on street-level bureaucracy. Lipsky's innovative study explained how street-level bureaucrats such as child welfare workers constitute public policy in action. He understood bureaucrats' interactions with service users in the context of the structural conditions in which they work (Brodkin, 2012): what drives front-line policy is not necessarily bureaucrats' attitudes and preferences, but policy aims and organizational conditions, including the availability of financial resources and the extent of managerial control of workers' discretion (Brodkin, 1997, 2012). Governments outline policy aims that may be clear or contradictory; they may be knowable, or not knowable; and workers may

(or may not) be able to implement them given organizational conditions (Brodkin, 2012).

In the area of child welfare, the principles underlying the systems are clearly laid out in legislation and policy documents; however, they can be quite vague and contradictory as illustrated by the (possibly conflicting) principles of best interest and family preservation. If policy aims are contradictory or cannot be known (if, for instance, there are so many new rules that workers simply cannot keep up with them), or if they cannot be implemented (because of a lack of financial backing), this creates dilemmas for workers that they need to resolve. Workers may exercise the discretion they enjoy as street-level bureaucrats to deal with these dilemmas, and their resulting actions and decisions may be contradictory to the original policy aims. For instance, in the context of child welfare in the United States, Smith and Donovan (2003) found that, as a result of resource limitations, practices of frontline foster care caseworkers conflicted with best practice guidelines in several ways, ultimately not meeting the time limits for reunification established by the 1997 Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA).

We have taken Lipsky's focus on the importance of policy aims and organizational conditions as a starting point to explore how child welfare workers view the policy aims embedded in the legislative principles undergirding their child welfare system. It is important to analyze street-level policy aims because we know little about how child welfare workers in countries with similar policy aims, such as England, Norway and the United States, view these aims. While studies focusing on child welfare in a single country can pinpoint the causes of the dilemmas that

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child welfare workers face in that particular country, only a cross-country study can begin to shed light on the relative impact of institutional context, including the character of policy aims (contradictory, etc.), organizational conditions and financial resources, on street-level bureaucrats' views of policy aims and dilemmas. This study, which is based on rich, in-depth qualitative interviews, explores these questions and develops hypotheses and theories—one of the strong suits of qualitative data (Goodwin & Horowitz, 2002).

In particular, we analyze the following questions: (1) Which principles do child welfare workers in England, Norway and the United States identify as the basic principles underlying their child welfare systems? (2) Are there cross-country similarities in workers' perceptions of the overarching aims of the child welfare systems in the countries under study? (3) Do the street-level policy aims embraced by child welfare workers concur with their country's policy aims at the time of the interview? If not, why not? (4) What do workers think of the principles they perceive, i.e. how do they reflect on street-level policy aims?

To our knowledge, there is no previous cross-country study that explores the policy aims of child welfare workers and analyzes how street-level policy aims in the area of child welfare compare to the policy aims stated by governments. It is therefore difficult to develop hypotheses based on previous research. In the following, we discuss the legislative principles underlying the child welfare systems in Norway, England and California (USA) that we expected the child welfare workers in our sample to identify before turning to workers' own perceptions.

2. Policy orientations and legislative principles

The English and U.S.-American child welfare systems have been categorized as 'child protection systems,' whereas the Norwegian child welfare system is considered a 'family service' system (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). A child protection system is characterized by a comparatively high threshold for intervention, with a focus on preventing and stopping serious risk that can harm the child's health and safety (Gilbert et al., 2011). The USA represents this type of system more so than England. England has been moving towards a family service system on some dimensions, as is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the Common Assessment Framework (Department of Health, 2000; Stafford, Parton, Vincent, & Smith, 2011). Family service systems aim to promote a healthy childhood and seek to prevent serious risk and harm through the provision of universally available public services, based on the therapeutic idea of people's ability to improve their lifestyle and behavior with the help of early intervention (Skivenes, 2011). In a country like Norway, the basic presumption is that the child welfare system should provide services to prevent more serious harm, and thus prevent out-of-home placements. The threshold for intervention is low compared to systems with a child protection orientation (Skivenes, 2011).

There is some overlap between the basic principles underpinning the child welfare systems in England, Norway and the United States. The following basic principles are typically highlighted in law and policy-related publications in all three countries: the *best interest and/or well-being of the child*; *family preservation*; *permanency*, and *safety*. (In addition, policy documents also mention the principles of least intrusion, and of the child welfare system only having the secondary responsibility for children compared to the family.) (Berrick, 2011; Children Act, 1989; Department of Health, 2000; Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003; Skivenes, 2011). However, the degree to which governments focus on individual principles differs across countries, as we show below. In addition, the principles are also contradictory: for instance, the principles of permanency and family preservation contradict each other in the case of a child who is removed from home.

Different countries balance these principles in different ways. In the context of the family service orientation of the Norwegian child welfare system, three principles are prevalent: the first is the child's best interest, the second one, which is quite pronounced, is family preservation, and the third is permanency for the child (Skivenes, 2011). The best

interest of the child is a principle that has a strong standing in Norway and has gained more strength over the past ten years. Despite the fact that the principle of family preservation has had a long historical legacy in Norway and is very significant at present, we could not find many explicit statements in policy documents about how family preservation is to be balanced with the child's best interest. Permanency is another principle that has also had a strong tradition in the Norwegian child welfare system; it is emphasized in the *Child Welfare Act, 1992* in the paragraph on the child's best interest:

When applying the provisions of this chapter, decisive importance shall be given to framing measures which are in the child's best interests. This includes attaching importance to giving the child stable and good contact with adults and continuity in the care provided (*Child Welfare Act, 1992*, Section 4-1).

The interpretation of the permanency principle has traditionally been related to the family preservation principle and therefore encouraged in-home services to secure permanency in the original family (Skivenes, 2002).

In England, the main legislative principles are quite similar to the Norwegian system, with a focus on the child's welfare and safety, permanence and family preservation (*Children Act, 1989*). According to the *Children Act, 1989*, it is the duty of local authorities "to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need; and so far as it is consistent with that duty, to promote the upbringing of such children by their families, by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs" (Department of Health, 2000: 4). England has also increasingly emphasized permanence for children in care in relationship to adoptions and permanent foster care (Boddy, 2013).

In the United States, the stated policy aims are, first, ensuring the child's safety, followed by permanency, and, third, child and family well-being (Berrick, 2011; Goldman et al., 2003). Goldman et al. (2003: 9) summarize the principles established by the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA):

Safety All children have the right to live in an environment free from abuse and neglect. The safety of children is the paramount concern that must guide child protection efforts.

Permanency Children need a family and a permanent place to call home. A sense of continuity and connectedness is central to a child's healthy development.

Child and family well-being Children deserve nurturing environments in which their physical, emotional, educational, and social needs are met. Child protection practices must take into account each child's needs and should promote healthy development.

Based on the differences in orientations between the child protection-oriented systems (England and the United States) versus the family service system represented in this study (Norway), and given the overlapping principles embraced by the three countries, we expected to see similarities as well as differences in workers' perceptions between Norway, England and the United States. We expect variation in relation to child safety—a theme which we expect to be more prevalent in England and the United States than in Norway. We also expected to find statements about conflicting policy aims, such as the tension between the principle of the child's best interest and the principle of family preservation.

3. Methods

This study, which was funded by the Norwegian Research Council, is part of a larger research project comparing child welfare systems in

England, Norway and the United States (California). We chose these three cases because we aimed for a different case comparison. Based on previous research (Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert et al., 2011), we knew that the three countries represented different approaches to child welfare. Practical considerations were important as well, especially accessibility of research sites. This paper builds on the analysis of the responses to in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a total of 92 child welfare workers in California (40 responses), England (25 responses) and Norway (27 responses), conducted between January 2008 and June 2010. We mainly discuss the study sample here. A discussion of methods of data collection and analysis can be found in previous articles (Križ & Skivenes, 2011, 2012).

The American Public Human Services Association (2005) distinguishes between five categories of child welfare workers: (1) child protective service (CPS) workers; (2) in-home protective service workers; (3) foster care and adoption workers; (4) multiple program workers; and (5) front-line supervisors. Following this categorization, our sample in California consisted mostly of child protective service workers who also provided in-home services, even though several workers mentioned occupying other professional roles in the child welfare system in the past. A few of our interviewees were front-line supervisors. We recruited our Californian sample in 'emergency response units.' These are the units that undertake risk assessments immediately or within 10 days of the referrals that are screened in. These units can provide services for 30 days (Reed & Karpilow, 2009). In England and Norway, all study participants were involved in front-line child protection work, either through investigating cases and/or providing ongoing services. A few of them self-identified as managers.

In California, study participants received a compensation of \$150 for their participation in the interview (typically lasting 1–1.5 h) and for responding to an online survey (lasting for 1–1.5 h). Our choice to pay study participants an honorarium was based on a research reimbursement model, which proposes reimbursing participants for their time (Grady, Dickert, Jawetz, Gensler, & Emanuel, 2005). We also followed justice considerations—we wanted all participants in the project to receive the same amount of money, regardless of their country of residence. The honorarium may have motivated more, and a broader set of workers to participate, but it may also have skewed the sample towards those who were attracted by the honorarium. However, we have checked for other biases, and we know that our sample is representative of their units/agencies with regard to workers' age, education, work experience, gender and ethnicity at the time of the interview.

Study participants were experienced child welfare workers. Our Californian sample of 40 workers was unusually experienced with 16 years of work experience on average, with a range from 4 to 32 years, and a median of 15 years. In England, the average years of work experience amounted to 10 years, with a range from 2 to 35 years, and a median of nine years. In Norway, the average work experience amounted to 10 years, with a range from 2 to 35 years, and a median of eight years. In all three countries, study participants were almost all women, and in Norway and England, participants were almost all White. The Californian sample was more ethnically and racially diverse and also more highly educated. All but one study participant had earned a master's degree, and two participants had obtained a Ph.D. degree. In Norway, all workers held a bachelor's degree. In England, fewer than half of study participants had earned a master's degree, while the remaining participants held a bachelor's degree. The variation in education levels across the samples can be considered a limitation of this study.

This study is based on workers' responses to two questions: (1) "As you see it, what are the principles underlying the child protection system in Norway/England/CA (USA)?" and (2) "What do you think of these principles?" We analyzed the interview transcripts in two stages: first, we identified common themes (Weiss, 1994) after careful reading of the transcripts and deliberation between the two authors; we then counted how many study participants fitted into the same thematic category in one country and compared themes and their frequencies across

countries. We also examined whether the codes emergent from the data overlapped with the policy principles stated by the governments in the three countries. The interviews were initially coded by the authors and then re-coded and reliability-tested by two research assistants. We used the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. Table 1 shows the codes that we identified that were mentioned by more than 20% of the study participants in each country. (For the sake of simplicity, we use the country term, for instance "Norway," instead of "the sample of workers from Norway" below.)

The most obvious limitation of this study is that the sample, which is based on workers employed in two counties in one state in the USA, one local authority in England, and two municipalities in Norway, is not representative of each country. There is significant system variation across U.S. states, even though the federal government sets legal standards for the entire country (Berrick, 2011). As policy principles are established in federal guidelines that all U.S. states are required to follow, California is one useful case to study child welfare workers' perceptions of these principles. However, it is evident that two agencies in one state cannot in any way be representative of the entire country.

4. Findings

4.1. Child-centered versus safety-oriented street-level policy aims

Table 2 shows that street-level policy aims look quite different in England, Norway and the United States. The table also reveals that street-level policy aims reflect the types of child welfare systems that workers practice in and echo the principles set out by child welfare legislation and policy. Norwegian street-level policy aims are child-centered and child welfare-oriented. English policy aims are safety-oriented and child-centered; and U.S.-American policy aims are safety-oriented and family-centered. Not surprisingly given the child focus of Norwegian legislation and policy, Norwegian workers' responses demonstrate a focus on the child, family preservation and statements about a child's needs. England exhibits a child protection orientation with a strong child focus, while the USA emerges as a primarily safety-oriented and family-centered system. The latter is also not surprising given the explicitly stated principle of permanence and the assumption in federal guidelines that it is best for children to be cared for by their parents at home (De Panfilis & Salus, 2003). What is surprising, however, is that only six out of all study participants (one from England, one from Norway, and four from the United States) either mentioned the word "permanency" explicitly or discussed stability or continuity for the child.

4.2. England

A Child-focused Law: "Talks a Good Talk, but Doesn't Put the Money There." In England, workers' street-level policy aims concurred with the principles set out in law and policy. As expected, workers embraced both a narrow and wider understanding of safety by talking about "risks" as well as "needs." Many explicitly linked their responses to the language and intention of the *Children Act, 1989*. While a large number explicitly cited the child focus of the legislation and expressed their support for it, several also pointed to the schism between the principles and the inadequacies of the child protection system in practice as a result of resource limitations.

Workers' responses around the theme of safety oscillated between a narrow understanding of safety as protecting children from risk of harm ($n = 11$), and a wider understanding of safety that encompasses concerns about children's development, their 'welfare,' and their 'needs,' in addition to protecting them from risk of harm ($n = 9$). Study participant 1246:1250,² who embraced a narrow understanding of safety, told

² The numbers here identify study participants by their location in the Atlas.ti file.

Table 1
Code descriptions.

Code	Description of Content
Child focus/child's best interest & child's welfare/well-being	Child-centrism: idea that children and their interests should be at the center of child protection and/or that they should participate in decisions made about their lives. This code also includes explicit mentioning of the best interest principle or "the child's best interest" or the welfare principle, i.e. that it is important to work towards the welfare of the child.
Educate	Educate families about how to be good parents and teach parents how to keep children safe.
Family preservation/biological principle	Quotes on family preservation and on NOT removing children from families; keeping children with families; keeping families together, strengthening the family, providing services and help to the family; preventing stronger interventions; the idea that the best 'parents' for children are children's biological parents; comments such as "supporting families within their birth families."
Least intervention	The idea that the less intervention from the system, the better for children and families. The principle of least intrusion into the family by the child welfare system.
Needs	Statements about the child's needs, including that child is able to access health care and education; that children's educational, physical and mental health needs are met. This code includes quotes about children's development or developmental milestones and welfare, poverty; the larger picture of "need" (versus "risk").
Safety	Keeping children safe from the risk of harm, neglect and abuse; quotes include "imminent risk," "protect from risk of harm;" quotes on abuse, the California Penal Code & trauma to the child.

us: "the basic principles are primarily to protect children and keep them from harm, and, if possible, keep them within their family." When referring to needs, workers talked about children's emotional, physical, developmental and welfare needs. Frequently, workers who expressed a wider view of child protection mentioned public services (education, health care, etc.) as playing a key role in fostering a child's needs. (Only one worker in the English sample used the term 'safeguarding'.)

Several study participants mentioned the law right after we asked them the interview question about principles—they clearly viewed the law and policy papers as laying down the guiding principles for their work. Many also noted that they supported the principles established by law. The remark by worker 1079:1083 that "legislation really forms what we do in terms of child protection" points to the centrality of legislation in the English context.

The responses of many workers reflected the child focus of the law and policy documents. For instance, study participant 159:163 explained:

I think the principles are [...], the welfare of the child is paramount, and that is the starting point and everything else kind of ripples out from that point. I think that's a key thing. [...] you just got to keep focused on who my client is. And my client is very clearly the child. And the parents kind of come along with that as a package deal, but we're very clear about the underlying principle is the child is my client. And it's their welfare I'm looking after, and it's their interest I'm looking after.

Interestingly, when we inquired what workers thought of the principles, several of them also stated, without being prompted, that the principles and the reality of child welfare practice do not always go hand in hand. Some of the workers mentioned financial constraints, the lack of early intervention, the multiplicity of recent structural changes to the system, and standardized bureaucratic procedures. According to worker 1246:1250, "there is a disparity between the principles and what we're doing sometimes because the mechanisms that we use and how we're asked to do social work is getting narrower. So they are good principles, but in practice, I don't think it always happens, and there are too much other politics and resource issues and things like that that get in the way." This study participant believed that the standardized approach to child welfare work, which she called "tick-tock social work," alluding to the ticking off of boxes in case files, was antithetical to viewing a family in a holistic way, especially for newly hired workers, or workers who may be less qualified. Study participant 109:113, who also expressed that she supported the principles, felt that the time and resources available to her were insufficient to implement the principles, especially to focus on the child:

That is a bit I really struggle with in terms of the principles is that it's there in writing, but the reality of the job is that we're very much child-protection-led because of resources and finances. It talks a

good talk, but actually doesn't put the money there to live up to its expectations.

4.3. Norway

A Child-focused Practice: "A Good Childhood in their Home." Even though Norwegian law embraces three principles, we found that only two principles stood out among the Norwegian sample: a child focus/ a child's best interest and family preservation: among those workers whose responses showed a child focus or who mentioned the child's best interest ($n = 21, 78\%$), 14 (52%) evidenced a child focus and mentioned some version of the best interest principle. Five out of the nine workers who stated that family preservation is an important principle underlying their child welfare system explicitly made a reference to the biological principle—the principle that assumes that a child's biological kin are the ideal caregivers. The following quote illustrates how these two dominant principles come into play (and may conflict): "I think that it is the child's best interest that shall be the main focus, but it is not always easy to keep it the main focus. There can be issues that distract you, of course, as far as possible children shall stay with their parents, but if they are harmed by that (family), they cannot stay with them" (participant 1145:1149).

The majority of workers had a child focus in mind, which is in line with earlier research (Križ & Skivenes, 2012; Skivenes, 2011). The child-focused workers talked about the child and were clear about their priorities, stressing that the child should be the focus of the child welfare system. Quite a few workers combined their child focus with a statement saying that their system's most important principle is the principle of the child's best interest, referring to article 4-1 of the *Child Welfare Act, 1992*. Those workers who elaborated on the meaning of their child focus or the best interest principle pointed out the saliency of giving children equal opportunities, creating a good and safe childhood, letting children participate, and acting respectfully towards the child. We did not find the two latter statements in the English and U.S. data on principles. Some Norwegian workers emphasized that the child welfare system was developed for the protection of children, not adults, thereby referring to the ongoing debate in Norway about the best way to balance family preservation and child protection. The few workers who mentioned 'needs' also embraced a child focus and said that they considered the child welfare system responsible for the needs of the children in the system.

We found that workers in Norway typically did not add many comments or reflections around the principles they stated. This is especially evident in the quotes where workers underscored that a child focus is important or should be the aim for the child protection system; they stated but did not elaborate on this idea. Some identified the dilemma between providing in-home services and the time span allotted to do so, and some mentioned that it is problematic that the child welfare

Table 2
Principles underpinning child protection system as perceived by workers (n and percent). Only principles mentioned by 19% or more of the country sample are included.

Code	England	Norway	USA
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Child focus/child's best interest & child's welfare	13 (52%)	21 (78%)	9 (23%)
Family preservation & biological principle	9 (36%)	9 (33%)	27 (68%)
Needs	9 (36%)	5 (19%)	–
Safety	21 (84%)	–	37 (93%)
Educate	–	–	10 (25%)
N	25 (100%)	27 (100%)	40 (100%)

system does not evaluate whether its services are actually working. For instance, participant 1109:1113 stated: “To start with, it [the principle] is to provide in-home services so that children can have a good childhood in their home. [...] The best solution is for children to be able to stay in their family and to be in their environment, but the necessary conditions must be in place. I think we [the child welfare system] should do better at not providing so many in-home services over so many years. We should do better at seeing the child, and not the parents, because I think that we often give the parents another chance, but not the children.”

One worker mentioned that a child focus much too easily ends up in an adult focus because there are so many adults involved in a child welfare case. The same worker, participant 1236:1240, also emphasized the vagueness of the best interest principle. Another worker (1371:1372) pointed out that a child-focused system needs to consider the intrusiveness that such a system can mean for a child; if all professionals and adults expect a “personal and intimate” conversation with the child, that could have negative repercussions for the child.

To summarize, Norwegian workers clearly displayed a child focus in their understanding of the child welfare system, and half the sample mentioned family preservation. Most strikingly, neither the principle of least intrusion nor the stability principles were mentioned, even though they are clearly stated in the legislative framework. Of course, both these principles can be interpreted to be a part of the family preservation and biological principles because the provision of in-home services is less intrusive than removing the child from home, and when a child remains at home, the child's relationships and environment are supposed to be stable. Further, workers did not problematize or reflect much around these contradictory principles. Only very few workers elaborated on the implications or possible problems with the principles they identified. We are left wondering whether this sample of workers was simply not aware of all the principles, whether they did not experience or see contradictions, or whether they had sorted out all the dilemmas and contradictions. Compared to the English and USA samples, it is also striking that none of the Norwegian workers discussed problems created by resource barriers.

4.4. The USA

A Family-focused Practice: Keeping Children Safe and Preserving Families. In terms of workers' focus on safety, the principles mentioned by workers in the USA overlapped with legislation and the child protection system orientation. Workers did not explicitly mention the term ‘child and family well-being,’ even though this principle is a prominent aim in the federal guidelines. What did emerge from the data was that permanency was mainly understood as family preservation, a principle not mentioned in the federal guidelines (but that is of course linked to the principle of permanency): many workers conceptualized permanency as avoiding placement by not removing a child from the family; they did not typically discuss permanency in the context of finding a permanent care solution for children in foster care if reunification did not work out—perhaps because of the sample of workers we interviewed, who mainly work with the very front end of child welfare cases.

Interestingly, workers in the United States also mentioned educating parents as one of the principles underlying the child welfare system. The view of participant 213:220 evidences this theme: “Well, number 1 is to protect the child. And it is to protect the child from harm, to educate the parents on how to be better parents, and also educate them about what the law says [about what constitutes abuse].” Most of the workers who mentioned safety understood this principle to imply that children should be safe *in their own home, with their own family*; should this not be possible, they thought that a care solution needed to be found. Many of the workers who mentioned the safety principle (n = 37) also mentioned family preservation (n = 24). Participant 1270:1277 described what she saw as the ideological triumvirate of the child welfare system: child safety, family preservation (through prevention of removal by putting supports into place, or aiming for family reunification) and permanency: “child safety; trying to ensure that the children's basic needs are met. And trying to always, whenever possible, keep a child in the home. And trying to have permanency for the children who have to come into our care.” Similarly, worker 1661:1689 mentioned “the need to protect children; the need to try and keep families together—most of our efforts are towards getting kids to stay in the home, and see what we could put in place. And even when kids come into custody, there is the underlying principle that we will work to reunify the family.”

Many workers mentioned an ideological shift that occurred in the past two decades that replaced the system's focus on child removal for safety concerns with a focus on family preservation. Most of these study participants explicitly supported this shift while a few remained neutral, arguing that there were advantages and disadvantages to both approaches; only a few rejected this change in approach. Many workers noted the contradiction between the safety and family preservation principles—at a very basic level, removing a child from their immediate family for safety concerns opposes the idea of preserving that family. Participant 2037:2041 explicitly mentioned research evidence when explaining why she supported the principle of family preservation: “research [...] shows that children do better if they grow up with family and have that deeper connection, even if they're just getting the minimum level of care.” In a similar context, worker 1016:1026 spoke of “the damage of removal,” and worker 900:910 of the “trauma” of removal.

The most prominent street-level policy vision consisted of a combination of the principles of safety and family preservation, with safety taking precedence for most of the workers we interviewed. However, some workers also emphasized that financial, institutional and cultural hurdles reduce this two-fold vision to the reality of the single principle of safety, with family preservation remaining on the backburner. The causes workers reported for this practice reality included the State of California's financial crisis, which creates bureaucratic chutes instead of ladders, and social stigma of some disadvantaged communities. Participant 1754:1775 emphasized the state's dire financial situation, saying that “although the agency has pushed the preservation of families, sometimes it's very challenging for us. [...] We are constricted by the lack of monies and services.” She considered it imperative that families who are open to services receive them in a speedy manner so that workers can take this window of opportunity to initiate change. However, she also noted that bureaucratic hurdles sometimes slow down service provision for family preservation (see also [Ayón, 2009](#)). Worker 2115:2116 mentioned the lack of staff charged with supporting families—a result of a lack of financial resources, which leads to the fact that “there's not enough staff in the department.” In addition, she talked about stigma towards and discrimination of some communities, as obstacles to putting principles into reality. She sounded disillusioned when she concluded: “CPS was created to protect the children and to help the family, and that is the principle. But it does not always work that way.”

5. Discussion

In this study, we explored how street-level bureaucrats themselves view policy aims, and we can begin to speculate about how they think

they can translate them into practice. First, we sought to compare child welfare workers' perceptions of the basic principles underlying their work to find out whether workers' perceptions are similar across countries, given similarities in policy aims (but in the context of different orientations of child welfare systems, especially around the issue of safety versus children's welfare in general). We expected to see child welfare workers express somewhat similar street-level principles across countries because policy aims, especially the aims of child well-being and safety, the child's best interest, permanency and family preservation, are aims underpinning all three systems.

Our findings, which can only be considered exploratory based on the small, non-representative sample we used, were interesting: as previous literature suggests (Gilbert et al., 2011), England and the USA seemed to emerge as safety-focused child welfare systems, while Norway did not. However, this is where the similarities between England and the USA ended; we also found that seen through the eyes of child welfare workers, a focus on the child was a policy aim primarily perceived in England and Norway, and that the United States looked family-oriented rather than child-focused, at least among this small group of emergency response workers we interviewed in two agencies in California. Lastly, the USA evidenced a much stronger focus on family preservation and the biological principle than England and Norway. Even though these findings are based on a small, non-representative sample, we suggest that, based on these findings, one may call the Norwegian street-level policy aims child-centered and child welfare-oriented; English policy aims safety-oriented and child-centered; and U.S.-American policy aims safety-oriented and family-centered.

Second, we analyzed whether 'street-level policy aims' – workers' own perceptions of the principles underpinning their child welfare system – concurred with workers' country's policy aims at the time of the interview. As Table 2 illustrates, we found that contradictory policy aims (with or without an understanding of these contradictions by workers) seemed to go hand in hand with workers' curtailing policy aims: workers seemed to focus on some major policy areas and ignore others. In all three countries, almost none of the workers explicitly mentioned the term 'permanency.' In the USA, workers did discuss stability for a child but mainly understood it as avoiding placement, not in terms of finding a permanent placement for foster children in cases where family reunification is not possible. Could this be because the policy aims of safety and family preservation stand in contradiction to the aim of permanency in cases where children need to be removed from their families and another permanent care solution, outside of their family, needs to be found to keep them safe and ensure their well-being? In the context of the data in the USA, we think that workers' conceptualization of 'permanency' – as placement avoidance rather than permanency of care – might also be explained by the specificity of our sample of child welfare workers, most of whom were emergency response workers. Emergency workers may be less concerned about trying to find permanent care solutions because they are focusing on protecting children from immediate safety risks at the front end of cases. Future studies need to rely on a sample that includes child welfare workers occupying a whole range of positions in child welfare agencies.

Norwegian workers did not verbalize this contradiction between safety and permanency. We know from previous research that Norwegian workers are more likely to assess a neglected and abused child at higher risk than English and U.S.-American workers, and are more likely to suggest removal of the child (Križ & Skivenes, 2013; Skivenes & Stenberg, 2013). Perhaps the focus on the well-being and best interest of the child in Norway, in connection with the universal access to public services for children and their families, trumps and 'crowds out' the aim of permanency within the family.

In England, too, the fact that workers mentioned the permanency principle relatively infrequently can perhaps be explained by the fact that many workers we interviewed there also practiced on 'the front end' of cases, as ongoing workers who sought to put services into place to stabilize families. Could it also be that when policy aims are

contradictory, as a child's safety, family preservation and permanency can be, street-level bureaucrats' minds focus on fewer goals? In a related vein, a recent study by Resh and Pitts (2013), who examined lower and higher order goal achievements in schools, showed that goals are forsaken when there are many and conflicting goals. On the other hand, a synergy between lower and higher orders is easier to obtain when goals are substantively similar (Resh & Pitts, 2013). Future research which is based on a more representative sample of workers working with different stages in a case will need to analyze the issue of conflicting policy goals more systematically.

Third, we examined what workers thought of the principles they understood as the basic principles underlying their child welfare system. We expected to find differences in how workers viewed the avenues to implement these principles because of the different financial and organizational resources available: Norway represents one type of child protection system – a 'family service system' – in a generous social-democratic welfare state that provides universal affordable public services to all children and their families, and England and the United States represent another approach to child welfare—a 'child protection-oriented system', in a residual type of welfare state (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Gilbert et al., 2011). This, we assumed, would lead workers to face different dilemmas when implementing policy aims. This assumption was confirmed: we see that in the three countries, there are different challenges when street-level bureaucrats translate policy aims into actual front-line policy. Even if policy aims are clearly laid out in legislation and workers know them well and identify with them, as in the case of England, implementation problems occur when organizational conditions and managerial control thwart policy aims. Because of the small size of the sample, this finding needs to be interpreted with caution and compared to other empirical evidence: we know that in England, performance management systems have aimed at reducing social worker discretion (Harris, 1998). Wastell, White, Broadhurst, Peckover, and Pithouse's (2010) ethnographic research on social workers' discretion in children's services in England and Wales found that discretion had decreased following the introduction of standardized procedures and performance management systems. As a result, social workers engaged in practices that might compromise child welfare work (Wastell et al., 2010). Similarly, Munro (2011) suggests that the overly prescription of the way in which workers ought to practice had adverse consequences on their ability to do their work: "Increasing prescription for the ways in which child and family social workers respond to children and families' needs has had a number of ripple effects in the system. These have primarily manifested themselves as unintended consequences on the ability of children's social care to protect children and young people and feedback effects [...] forming damaging 'vicious circles'" (Munro, 2011: 137).

On the other hand, Evans' (2011) fieldwork on adult social work in England revealed that senior managers were often not able to curtail the discretion of frontline social workers because of the ideas and practices of professionalism of local managers, who identified with professional social work. In addition, a plethora of procedures and rules resulting from changes in the context of child welfare, with the aim to streamline worker decision-making, may also increase workers' discretion, as rules and procedures warrant interpretation (Evans & Harris, 2004). Lipsky assumed that discretion is a necessary component of street-level policy work; street-level bureaucrats need to make judgment calls by responding to individual circumstances—so-called "authorized" uses of discretion (Brodkin, 2012, 942). Lipsky's work also pointed to the possibility that workers would make use of their discretion in "unauthorized" ways (Brodkin, 2012, 942). This literature suggests that as they undertake their work, street-level bureaucrats in England could be pulled both towards authorized or unauthorized uses of discretion, or both, depending on the structural conditions they operate in. Only a large-scale study based on a randomized sample would be able to assess these hypotheses.

Forth, this cross-country study of front line child welfare workers casts light on how workers have been influenced by their institutional

context but simultaneously adjust policy aims into street level principles that are manageable within their day-to-day context. This supports the argument advanced by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2012), who suggested that when front line workers handle the tension between reality and the goals of social equity, they operate within an organizational context that influences how they prioritize and interpret policy aims. What this study suggested is that organizational context itself may be influenced by the nature, extent and resource-wealth of the welfare state that the street-level bureaucrat's organization is embedded in: this was particularly evident in the difference between workers in England and the USA on one hand, who deplored a lack of financial resources, whereas workers in Norway, on the other hand, did not even mention this issue.

6. Concluding remarks

This study sought to further our understanding of what street-level bureaucrats themselves think of policy aims enshrined in legislation, and what they say about translating these policy aims into everyday practice. Our study showed that it is important to differentiate theoretically between ideas underlying child welfare systems (the quality of policy aims—knowable and clear, or not knowable and contradictory), and the opportunities of street-level bureaucrats to translate these policy aims into practice, as Lipsky's work already illustrated. If a desirable goal is the 'accurate' translation of policy aims into street-level bureaucracy policy by providing street-level bureaucrats with the opportunity to actually implement policy aims, then these different issues lead to different possible avenues towards change in the different countries. Future research based on a representative sample will need to analyze which of the conditions in the three countries – the quality of policy aims or organizational conditions or the larger welfare state context – are more likely to result in the policy outcomes that policy makers had intended. This type of research would be useful in transferring "best practices" from one country to another.

Our study suggests that, according to the workers we interviewed in England (in 2008), organizational conditions and the extent of managerial control created barriers, as Munro's (2011) report on the child welfare system in England also indicates. These conditions would need to be improved for workers to implement policy aims. Our data indicate that child welfare workers in England also experienced a sense of curtailment of policy aims as a result of financial resource limitations. However, we do not exactly know whether it is organizational conditions under performance management and/or the lack of financial resources for public services that create barriers for workers and may drive adverse outcomes for children.

For Norway, research would need to clarify how workers think about and practice with principles that are encouraged by legislation but are contradictory in nature. Our findings also lead us to ask whether workers in Norway are aware of the policy aims, and if not, why not. We do not think that lack of knowledge of policy aims is the cause, or because Norwegian workers have a different type and level of training than workers in England and the USA: in fact, about half of child welfare workers in Norway hold a BA in child welfare work, whereas half graduated with a BA in social work (40%) or an even higher degree in social work (10%) (Skivenes, 2011). Future research would need to analyze this question in more detail so adequate policy recommendations could be developed. In the United States, organizational conditions, especially financial resource limitations, which workers in this study perceived as a barrier to translating policy aims into practice, would need to be streamlined with policy aims to reduce dilemmas for child welfare workers. In addition, the invisibility of the policy aim of child and family well-being, which may be due to the specificity of our sample, would need to be analyzed further in the future.

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