

The Population's Confidence in the Child Protection System – A Survey Study of England, Finland, Norway and the United States (California)

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Abstract

This article examines the confidence the population ($N = 4,003$) has in the child welfare system in four countries – England, Finland, Norway and the USA (California). We find that about half or less of the population reports having confidence in the system, which is slightly higher than the confidence in the civil servants in the same countries. The Nordic countries display more confidence in the child welfare system than the Anglo-American countries. The similarity between the countries is, however, greater than anticipated. As for independent variables that can shed light on differences in confidence levels, we find three variables to be related to a higher confidence level, and these are a left wing political orientation, lower age, and higher education. This study contributes in filling a knowledge gap on studies about trust in the child welfare system, but we emphasize that we have studied an aspect of trust that rests on the population's impressions of a system, and not their substantial knowledge about, or identification with, this system.

Keywords

Confidence; Child welfare system; Population; Norway, Finland, England, California (USA)

Introduction

The child welfare system and its decision makers, child welfare workers and judges, are delegated power to intervene in the private sphere if it is found necessary in order to protect a child. This delegation of power is given to the decision makers by our politically elected representatives, and rests upon the trust and confidence that is embedded in our democratic system, based on rule of law (Heywood 2004). Child welfare interventions are in many regards controversial, not only because they restrict individual freedom, but also because the decisions in question are difficult and complex, without clear and exact problem solving solutions (Skivenes 2002). An observed trend the last 20 years in many high-income countries is increased public scrutiny and criticism of the child welfare system (Gilbert *et al.* 2011). We do not know

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whether increased criticism is due to the public's lack of trust in the system and its decision makers. What we do know, however, is that the level of trust in a political order is a well known factor in measuring legitimacy in a democracy. Legitimacy is simply understood as '... the quality that transforms naked power into rightful authority' (Heywood 2004: 141). An often overseen part of the democratic legitimacy is the impact of the implementation of the policy goals, as pointed out by the Swedish political scientist, Bo Rothstein (1998). In his book, *Just Institutions Matter*, he emphasizes how Max Weber early on made the point that '... the implementation of policy by bureaucrats – was at least as important, for it was this side of the state with which citizens came into direct contact, and on which they were dependent' (Rothstein 1998: 165). From a Nordic welfare state starting point, with a relatively large welfare service provision, it is particularly interesting to explore the Nordic populations' trust in the frontline of the welfare state, and further, to compare this to market-based types of welfare states, such as the USA and England. Arts and Gelissen (2002) elaborate on the welfare state models as originally laid out in Esping-Andersen's (1990) classic work, and point out two important dimensions: the degree of decommodification, i.e. citizens' independence of the market; and the social stratifications and solidarities among citizens (Arts and Gelissen 2002). Most welfare state researchers classify Norway and Finland as high on decommodification, with broad solidarities and extensive universal services. The American and English systems are considered high on market dependency and few universal public services (cf. Arts and Gelissen 2002).

Research and data on trust levels in child welfare systems are scarce, but there are numerous survey reports and indexes on confidence and trust in the public sector, politicians, the police and the mass media, to mention a few areas. In this article, we examine the level of trust and confidence the general population in four countries – England, Finland, Norway and the USA (California) – has in its child welfare system, and its child welfare workers and judges who make child welfare decisions. The four countries involved in this study represent two types of child welfare systems: risk-oriented and service-oriented systems (Gilbert *et al.* 2011; Gilbert 1997). A risk-oriented system has a relatively high threshold for intervention and a focus on mitigating serious risks to children's health and safety (Gilbert *et al.* 2011). The USA clearly exemplifies this approach, and while the English system also in its core represents a risk-oriented system, it also displays elements of service-orientation. In risk-oriented systems, there are high barriers for interference in the private sphere; thus, these systems have high thresholds for intervention. In service-oriented systems, the aims are to promote healthy childhoods as well as to mitigate serious risks, with an emphasis on the prevention of harm (Skivenes 2011). Thus, the state provides early intervention services to children and families in at-risk situations, in order to prevent a development into more serious risk and future harm to the child. Both Norway and Finland are clear types of service-oriented systems.

The overarching aim is, therefore, to examine whether there are differences in trust levels between the Nordic countries on the one hand, and the Anglo-American countries on the other hand, by presenting a descriptive analysis of the confidence the general population in four countries holds

towards its child welfare systems and its decision makers. We also examine whether demographic factors and political orientation can explain levels of trust. The four selected countries represent different child welfare systems and welfare state models (Gilbert *et al.* 2011; Berrick *et al.* 2015), and vary in many respects, both culturally and politically (Skivenes *et al.* 2015). The system differences also reflect how the line between public and private responsibility for children is drawn. The comparatively huge public sectors in the Nordic countries versus the welfare states in the Anglo-American countries indicate that the citizen's relationship with the state will be different in these four countries. Research on trust does show that the general trust level in a country is related to the specific trust level towards for example a sector (cf. Christensen and Læg Reid 2003). The expectation for the four countries involved in this study is that Norway and Finland will share similarities, and the same will be true for England and the USA (California).

The article is organized into four parts, starting with a presentation of some of the literature on trust in political systems and some background information about the four countries' child welfare systems and related trust studies done here. A method section is thereafter outlined, followed by a presentation of findings. Lastly, we end the article with a discussion of these findings, and a brief conclusion.

Trust in political systems

The child welfare system represents a strong state power, providing professionals with the authority to intervene into the private sphere with or without the consent of the concerned individuals. The increased attention directed towards children's rights and the social conditions for their upbringing (Shapiro 1990) sets a renewed light on the state's role in relation to the family, and how the state shall protect and provide for children without overstepping their freedom based on a contract with the citizens (Burns *et al.* 2016, forthcoming). It is obvious that with the power that the child welfare system holds, it is a system that needs to be legitimate (Gilbert *et al.* 2011; Skivenes *et al.* 2015). Legitimacy is, however, a contested concept, and for some it is sufficient that the electorate are content with the exercise of state power: if the electorate vote for a government, they also provide their support for the government (Heywood 2004: 142). For others, there is a need for much more, as Beetham (1991, referred to in Heywood 2004: 142) points out when he formulates three conditions that must be fulfilled, 'First, power must be exercised according to established rules ... Second, these rules must be justified in terms of the shared beliefs of the government and the governed ... Third, legitimacy must be demonstrated by the expression of consent on the part of the governed' (Heywood 2004: 142). In the deliberative democracy tradition it is common to apply the principle which states that only those policies that cannot be raised rational objections to, in a free and open debate, are legitimate (Habermas 1996). The variety of conceptual understandings of a legitimate political order is clearly related to the theoretical perspectives on democracy. Nevertheless, the level of trust in an organization, a system or a regime, is a classical measure of the strength and legitimacy of practices and institutions in a society. Trust is a measure of the

belief or opinion that people hold, but without examining the actual reasons that people state for having these beliefs, or whether the beliefs are actually true. Trust is often categorized into four forms (Lewicki and Bunker 1995; cf. Askvik 2003; Hathaway 2012; also cf. Sztompka's writings on trust, Sztompka 1999: 24f): the first form of trust, *calculus-based trust*, is about the cost-benefit interaction in which it is fairly easy to determine whether an object, person or organization is trustworthy. *Knowledge-based trust* concerns insight into the practices and routines of an object, person or organization, and as such is based on knowledge of practice. This demands some time and interaction for a person to be able to experience. *Identification-based trust* is about solid relationships in which the basics of the interaction are internalized and acknowledged by the object, person or organization. It often rests on a shared basis of values and beliefs. Lastly, *presumptive-based trust* rests on the reputation of an institution, profession, or the like, as it is the membership in a trustworthy group that creates this trust (Kramer and Lewicki 2010). In child welfare, this would typically be the form of trust citizens have in courts and judges. In our study, we ask the general population about their confidence in their country's child welfare system. We do not have information about their interaction with the system, but based on the statistics on child welfare service users (Gilbert *et al.* 2011) we can anticipate that not many of them have such experience. Thus, we argue that it is the fourth form of trust – presumptive trust – that is examined in this study.

A critique of opinion polls measuring citizens' trust in their public systems is that they often lack historical perspective, are single polls and are based on scattered observations (Van de Walle *et al.* 2008). There being only a handful of examinations of the trust in the child welfare system, the study reported on here is also a single study and only a first step towards gathering more information about this important theme. There are even fewer studies that examine the trust in child welfare workers' work or judges' decisions in child welfare cases. There are however, many studies that examine the trust the general population has in the state and in state institutions in Norway and elsewhere (cf. Christensen and Lægveid 2003: 8, which gives an overview of several studies). One clear result from studies by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) of confidence in national governments is that the populations' trust levels are much higher in Nordic countries than in Anglo-American countries (OECD 2013: 25). In 2012, 66 per cent and 60 per cent of the Norwegian and Finnish respective populations expressed confidence in their governments, versus 47 per cent and 35 per cent in the UK and the USA, respectively (OECD 2013: 25). Another clear result is that the populations' confidence in governments in OECD countries is declining measured in the period of 2007–13, 'Trust in governments is waning and the fairness of decision making is being questioned' (OECD 2014: 22).

Previous national and comparative survey research on trust

In the four countries examined in this article, only a few studies on the confidence in the child welfare system or its decision makers exist. In Finland, there are to our knowledge no studies of the population's confidence in the child

welfare system or its decision makers. In England, there is one large scale study of the general public's confidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. A sample of 4,234 young persons and adults (from the age of 16 and upwards) were asked if they are 'confident that the courts would come to a decision in care cases that was in the best interests of the child', and 68 per cent said they were very or fairly confident. Further, 65 per cent said the same about the court taking into account the views of parents. Lastly, the sample was asked if the court would deal with the case promptly, and 58 per cent were very or fairly confident the courts would do so. Except for the question on handling the case promptly, in which age and marital status mattered, there were no demographic variables that were of importance in the sample's confidence level (Ministry of Justice 2014: 10).

In California, or in fact the USA as a whole, it is difficult to find public opinion polls of the American population's general level of confidence in the child welfare system. Several studies have been done investigating the population's knowledge and perception of various components within the system, i.e. the foster care system (Leber and LeCroy 2012) and the extent of sexual abuse (Di Natale and Hock 1998), but, to our knowledge, not the system in its totality. Public confidence in the courts, however, has been documented by, amongst others, the National Center for State Courts (2014), which contracted with GBA Strategies to conduct a comprehensive public opinion survey of 1,000 registered voters, regarding their confidence in their state's courts. Key findings include that 71 per cent agree with the statement that courts in their respective state treat people with dignity and respect, and 67 per cent state that the court in their state is committed to protecting individual and civil rights. Thus, in the USA there is broad and growing confidence in the fairness of the courts. However, people with direct court experience have a lower confidence level than non-experienced people; those with direct experience in the court system rated the courts in their state 8–13 points lower on all the measures accounted for in the study (National Center for State Courts 2014: 3).

In Norway, there have been several surveys carried out with the focus on confidence or attitudes towards the child welfare system, aimed at both service users and the general public. The most recent citizen survey from 2013 (NSD 2015), about public services in the municipalities, showed that about 30 per cent expressed a somewhat positive sentiment about the child welfare agency, and as many as 60 per cent answered 'I don't know' or 'do not have an opinion'. In a similar study from 2004, about 33 per cent of the population expressed that the services of the child welfare agency were good, and 33 per cent expressed the opposite opinion (Wedde 2005: 4). A population survey study has also been carried out on the attitudes towards the child welfare system, examined by asking whether people had a positive or a negative impression of the child welfare system, surveyed in 2003 and in 2006 (Bufetat 2006). The results were that in 2006, about 31 per cent had a negative impression and 23 per cent had a positive impression, and there was a group of 31 per cent answering that they neither have a positive nor a negative impression (Bufetat 2006). There was an increase in the positive impression from 2003 to 2006 of 5 percentage points. This survey showed

that women, persons with a university or college education, younger persons, and persons with children in their household were more positive than the opposite (Bufetat 2006). A survey developed by Synovate MMI, on behalf of the Norwegian Courts Administration (2012), focused on the Norwegian population's (N = 1,002) level of trust in the Norwegian courts. The results showed that there has been an increase in the level of trust in the courts, where 85 per cent of the population now has quite a lot or a great deal of trust in the courts, which entails surpassing the trust level in the police for the first time. Thirty-five per cent of men have a great deal of trust, while 30 per cent of women have the same, and trust levels decrease a bit for the older respondents. Trust increases along with level of education (Norwegian Courts Administration 2012).

A comparative study worth mentioning in relation to the topic of our study is an International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) survey from 2006, which had the 'Role of Government' as its primary focus. The population's trust¹ in civil servants² across, amongst others, the four countries in our study was measured. The results told us that Finland has the most trust, with 45.4 per cent trusting or strongly trusting, Norwegians at 35 per cent, Americans at 29.7 per cent and the British at 22.6 per cent of the respondents trusting or strongly trusting that civil servants would do what is best for their respective countries (ISSP 2006).

Methods and Data Material

The present study is funded by the Norwegian Research Council, and data has been collected amongst a representative sample of the population from England, Finland, Norway and the USA (California) (N = 4,003 respondents). For the background questions, we used standard formulations provided by the data collection company Norstat, which controlled the data collection process and was responsible for the sample recruitment and data collection in all four countries. In Norway, a weekly omnibus ran where a representative panel participated, and quotas and weighting controlled for a sample reflecting the general population, based on demographic questions such as age, gender, county, education, household income and urbanization. The way in which representativeness is ensured is by Norstat programming for country representative quotas and thereby adjusting the daily survey rounds according to this. If a demographic is underrepresented in the sample, more respondents are asked to ensure representativeness. Lastly, the sample is weighted so that the representativeness is completely accurate. In Finland, Norstat arranged an 'ad hoc' questionnaire for its representative panel based on the same demographics, and in England and the USA, Norstat programmed the survey, and partnered with Research Now for distributional purposes and to use its representative panel.³

We asked the panels the following questions regarding confidence in their country's child welfare system: Please tell us how much confidence you, personally, have in: 'The child welfare agencies that shall protect children', 'The child welfare workers that are working at these agencies', and, 'The judges in court that make decisions about care orders'. The answer

alternatives were on a four-point scale: 'a great deal' (coded as 1), 'quite a lot' (coded as 2), 'some' (coded as 3), 'very little' (coded as 4), with an additional category of 'unsure' (coded as 5), which was omitted in the correlations analysis. Upon analysis, we first reversed the coding, so that a low score (1 or 2) on the variable indicates a low confidence level, and a higher score (3 or 4) indicates a higher confidence level. Then, we collapsed the values 'very little' and 'some' (coded as 1), and 'quite a lot' and 'a great deal' (coded as 2). We used the statistical program Stata, and undertook simple correlation analyses, chi square tests, and one-way ANOVA tests. We also tested for significant relationships using the program Zigne Signifikans, using a two-tailed test at a 5 per cent significance level and for a single randomized sample, when testing for differences in trust levels in the three child welfare system components (agency, workers and judges). We report significance the following way: * = $p < 0.10$, ** = $p < 0.05$, *** = $p < 0.01$, with the awareness that both the $p < 0.05$ and particular $p < 0.10$ is on the margin of what is relevant to report as statistically significant.

For the correlation analysis, we constructed a scale (Cronbach's alpha 0.86 after reversing and removing 'unsure' and $N = 3,691$; 0.88 for the unreversed scale with $N = 4,003$) measuring total system trust, the mean score of each of the three variables, excluding people who were missing two or more answers, making the total $N = 3,691$ for this scale. Average score is rounded up to the closest whole number. Taking the high alpha score into consideration, this means that the three confidence variables measure to a high extent the same thing. We have not done pairwise deletion of missing data, so the N varies on a couple of the variables. The N indicates respondents who have answered both the variable in question and at least two of the confidence questions (cf. table 3). The Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 draws on the scale variable with combined mean scores and we label this variable the *child welfare system*. Otherwise, we specify the three variables as *child welfare agency*, *child welfare workers* or *judges*.

We expect Norway and Finland to have more trust in the system and the decision makers than their fellows in the USA and England. In the analysis we also examine whether the following demographic variables have an impact on the degree of trust; gender (dummy coded with male coded as 0, female coded 1), education (dummy variable coded 0 for all who do not have a master's degree and coded 1 for those who have a master's degree). Age is a continuous variable that takes the age as values, but we have also divided the respondents into three age groups; younger (16–34), mid-age (35–54) and older (54+). Political orientation is coded as left-wing (1), centrist (2) and right-wing (3), and has also been dummy coded (left-wing as 1, and any other preference as 0). This variable was challenging to construct as a general for the four countries, as each national sample were asked what party they would vote for if a hypothetical national general election were to take place the next day. Taking the different political climates and national variances into account, this variable must be applied and interpreted with caution. Income is coded as low income (1), average income (2) and high income (3), also dummy coded with high income as 1, and the other income groups as 0. The same difficulties are encountered here with financial systems and

national variations, since the national samples were asked about their annual income in their local currencies, divided into groups based on national median incomes, therefore locally embedded, and not compared to a universal amount. The chosen classifications are tested upon researchers from each of the countries/state. The respondents were also asked how many in the household were under the age of 18, and the number they answered is the applied code. This variable was recorded for the analysis, so that if the respondents do not have children below 18 years of age living at home, the code is 0, and for those who do have one or more children at home, the code is 1. More on the merging of the income and political variables is also available on the website in note 3.

The study is limited as it measures confidence in the child welfare system at one point in time, and further, we have few or no other studies to compare it with. As such we are contributing to fill a knowledge gap, but are less able to elaborate on the different types of confidence that may exist. There is one caveat for the Finnish material. Since the child welfare system is often seen as an integral part of the social service system, it may be that some of the sentiments expressed concern the social service system in general. In this article, when referring to our survey, we refer to the phrasing 'confidence in the child welfare agency' or the like, but when speaking in more general terms, or summarizing findings, we use the terms 'trust' and 'confidence' interchangeably (Grimen 2012).

Findings

The findings show that about 40 per cent of the population expresses quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the child welfare systems in these four countries, cf. table 1, which presents an overview of the frequencies for the trust levels for the whole sample of four countries.

The level of confidence is quite similar in the four countries, with the Norwegian population having the most confidence in the child welfare agency

Table 1

Frequencies on confidence in the child welfare agency, child welfare workers, and judges making child welfare decisions (%)

	Child welfare agency % (N)	Child welfare workers % (N)	Judges in child welfare cases % (N)
Very little	15.8%(634)	14.8%(592)	14.4%(577)
Some	38.9%(1555)	38.5%(1541)	39.3%(1573)
Quite a lot	30.2%(1210)	31.7%(1268)	30.6%(1225)
A great deal	10.5%(420)	9.8%(391)	9.7%(388)
Unsure	4.6%(184)	5.3%(211)	6%(240)
TOTAL	100%(4003)	100%(4003)	100%(4003)

Note: N = 4,003.

and the child welfare workers, followed by Finland, England, and the USA (California) (cf. table 2). Norwegians also have the highest level of confidence in their *child welfare system* (the scale of the three combined system components). There is a significant difference ($p < 0.01$) between the Norwegian population and the California-American population, with the former having greater confidence in the system. The difference is evident on the child welfare agency ($p < 0.001$) and child welfare workers ($p < 0.01$) variable, whereas the confidence in judges' decision making is not significantly different between Norway and the USA (California). There are no significant differences between the other three countries, but there are some differences in how they are ordered within the three variables. On the first two trust variables, trust in the agency and the child welfare workers, Norway is on top, followed by Finland, England and the USA (California). On the variable on confidence in judges, Norway is also on top, but now followed by the USA (California), England and then Finland. In table 2 an overview by countries is presented, here with collapsed answer alternatives.

Further, we examined whether the following independent variables matter when it comes to trust in ones country's child welfare system: gender, political orientation, income level, age, whether they have children under 18 living in their household; education, and whether one works in the private or public sector (only Norwegian respondents). In the following, we report on the independent variables that have a significant impact, first for the whole sample and then on the country samples (correlation analysis is reported in the Appendix, tables A1, A2 and A3). In table 3, the overview of the significant correlations is displayed.

Table 2

Four countries, level of confidence in child welfare agency, child welfare workers and judges in child welfare cases in court (%)

	Child welfare agency		Child welfare workers		Judges in child welfare cases	
	% (N)	% (N) Quite a Very little/some lot/a great deal	% (N)	% (N) Quite a Very little/some lot/a great deal	% (N)	% (N) Quite a Very little/some lot/a great deal
California (USA)	66.4% (647)	33.6% (327)	62.7% (609)	37.3% (362)	56.7% (549)	43.3% (419)
England	59.4% (564)	40.6% (386)	59% (553)	41% (384)	59.4% (558)	40.6% (382)
Finland	53.3% (520)	46.7% (455)	55.9% (545)	44.1% (430)	60.4% (580)	39.6% (380)
Norway	49.8% (458)	50.2% (462)	46.9% (426)	53.1% (483)	51.7% (463)	48.3% (432)

Note: N = 4,003.

Table 3

Confidence in the *child welfare system*. Pearson's correlation coefficient and N

Variable	All	England	Finland	Norway	USA
Female	-0.0446*** (N = 3691)	-0.0088 (N = 918)	-0.0251 (N = 943)	-0.0030 (N = 870)	-0.1680*** (N = 960)
Left-wing	0.0991*** (N = 2742)	0.0425 (N = 565)	0.0773** (N = 686)	0.1402*** (N = 733)	0.1002*** (N = 758)
High income	0.1189*** (N = 3202)	0.0892** (N = 815)	0.0371 (N = 761)	0.0217 (N = 732)	0.2289*** (N = 894)
≥55 years old	-0.1199*** (N = 3691)	-0.1526*** (N = 918)	0.0499 (N = 943)	-0.0827** (N = 870)	-0.2321*** (N = 960)
Has child in home	0.0277 (N = 3093)	0.1220*** (N = 761)	-0.0104 (N = 688)	-0.0057 (N = 870)	0.0333 (N = 774)
Has master's degree	0.1547*** (N = 3691)	0.0731** (N = 918)	0.1186*** (N = 943)	0.0999*** (N = 870)	0.2666*** (N = 960)
Employment in public sector	-	-	-	0.1098** (N = 570)	-

Notes: ** = $p < 0.05$. *** = $p < 0.01$. - = no data.

Looking at the independent demographic variables, we first see that, when examining the whole sample and trust in the system as a whole, gender matters, as women have less confidence ($p < 0.01$) in the child welfare system compared to men. Locally, however, we see that the only country where this relationship is statistically significant is in the USA (California). This relationship seems so strong, however, that it affects the relationship overall. Looking at the three system components individually across all four countries, the agency, workers and judges, we do not find that there is a significant relationship between gender and trust in judges. We see here that between the three system components, the general trust in the USA (California) is highest towards the judges, which affects the total trust score in judges.

Second, political orientation matters, as those who vote for parties on the political left side in politics have more trust in the child welfare system than those who place themselves on the right end of the political scale. This difference is significant on $p < 0.01$ level for the whole sample, and is evident in Finland ($p < 0.05$), Norway ($p < 0.01$) and the USA (California) ($p < 0.01$).

Third, income has an impact on level of trust in the child welfare system, as those with higher income levels have more trust than those with lower income levels ($p < 0.01$). This is evident at the country level for England ($p < 0.05$) and for the USA (California) ($p < 0.01$).

Fourth, we can see that age matters as younger persons have more trust in the child welfare system than older people ($p < 0.01$). This is evident in England ($p < 0.01$), Norway ($p < 0.05$) and the USA (California) ($p < 0.01$).

Fifth, persons with children under the age of 18 living in their household have more confidence in the child welfare decision makers ($p < 0.01$) than people without children living with them, and the trust level increases when

the respondents have one to three children, but then decreases if they have four or five children. However, this latter correlation is only evident in England ($p < 0.01$), not in any of the other three countries.

Lastly, higher education matters, as those with a master's degree have more trust in the child welfare system than those without ($p < 0.01$). This correlation is evident in all four countries at a $p < 0.01$ level, except for the English population, in which the relationship is only significant at a $p < 0.05$ level.

In the Norwegian sample, we also measured the impact of working in the private versus public sectors, and how and whether this impacts level of trust. Here, we find that individuals who work in the private sector have less confidence in the child welfare system, compared to those who work in the public sector ($p < 0.05$).⁴

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Overall, there is only around half or less of this population sample that expresses confidence in the child welfare system and its decision makers. Norway displays the highest level of confidence, and the USA (California) the lowest confidence level. The relative low confidence in this system across these four countries challenges the legitimacy of the governmental power, a point we return to below. The big puzzle is how we now should interpret the survey findings. One reason for a low confidence level is mass media's coverage of child welfare systems (Parton and Berridge 2011), with harsh critique of child welfare decision making. We should then expect that in particular the English population would show less confidence in their child welfare system, compared to the confidence in the public sector in general, as the English mass media is considered to be extremely harsh towards their child welfare system and its workers (Parton and Berridge 2011). However, this is not the case, as our findings show.

Another question is whether these findings are particular for the child welfare system, or whether they reflect a general sentiment around public administrations. We do not have much data to compare these findings with, which makes it difficult to predict what to expect with regard to the level of confidence that we have measured. Even though extensive studies that can be related to legitimacy are completed every year, it is a challenge to find comparable data cross-country. Further, it is problematic to compare results, since formulations such as 'trust', 'impressions' and 'experience' are used interchangeably, and some surveys measure service users' experiences, and some measure the general population's attitudes. It is also a fact that trust levels vary along with the occurrence of political and sector based scandals and national incidents (Bowler and Karp 2004; National Center for State Courts 2014: 2). Our findings coincide with the 'Role of Government study' and trust in civil servants when identifying higher trust levels in the Nordic countries than the Anglo-American countries, although measuring higher levels of trust in general among the populations (ISSP 2006). Interestingly, our child welfare system findings display that the populations in England, Norway and California (USA) clearly have a higher confidence in child welfare workers than they have in civil servants (using the ISSP survey from 2006). On this note, and compared to the existing knowledge on trust in the child welfare system, in which

we in Norway have the best knowledge base, our study depicts a much higher level of confidence than previous surveys. We do not have any substantial explanation for this, and thus speculate that it may be due to the formulation of the questions we asked, which were about *confidence*, and not about positive or negative impressions of the service, which, as stated, is how other surveys have phrased the question (Bufetat 2006). Another reason can be that we do in fact have a significant improvement in the population's opinion about the child welfare system. Yet another reason, and perhaps the most realistic one, is that we in our study have asked several extensive questions specifically about the child welfare system, i.e. about the child welfare agency, and about both child welfare workers' and judges' decisions. Further, we presented a vignette with two children in a potential harmful situation, and a question with a scenario where the respondents were to choose between foster home placements versus putting a child up for adoption (Skivenes and Thoburn 2016, in preparation). This has perhaps given the respondents more time to dwell on the responsibilities and challenges of, and within, the child welfare system, and thus leads us to believe that the opinions expressed here are more qualified and carefully considered than other surveys that may focus less on the child welfare system and its different components and decision making points. One implication of this reasoning is to develop research design that in various ways provides information and knowledge about the child welfare system and its responsibilities and provisions. This would also provide an opportunity to employ a more complex theoretical approach.

We do find, as expected and mentioned, that the Nordic countries display more trust than the Anglo-American countries. However, the similarity between the countries is much greater than expected, and we do not have a good explanation for this. When it comes to the significant differences in the populations in Norway and the USA (California), this may be related to the general trust levels towards the state in these two societies. Norway generally has a higher level of governmental trust, relative to a lower trust level in the USA.

Another expectation we had was that we would find a generally higher confidence level in judges versus child welfare workers. This is not evident in the material for the European respondents, but there is indeed a higher level of trust in judges than there is in child welfare workers in the USA (California). Interestingly, there is a lower level of trust in judges than in child welfare workers in Finland. However, in the English study on important aspects of the court's decision making process in child welfare cases (Ministry of Justice 2014), referred to in 'Previous national and comparative survey research on trust' (above), the reported confidence level of judges was 58–68 per cent, which is much higher than we find in our study.

As for independent variables that can shed light on differences in confidence level, we find three variables to be related to a higher confidence level overall: political orientation, age and education. Those with a left-wing political orientation showed higher confidence levels in the child welfare system, and we relate this to a general notion that this segment of political orientation will rely more heavily on collective responsibilities and thus also more state responsibilities. Age comes to matter in the sense that younger people have more confidence in the system than older people, and the same finding was evident in

the Norwegian child welfare survey (Bufetat 2006) and Norwegian (Norwegian Courts Administration 2012) and English (Ministry of Justice 2014) court surveys. We believe one reason for this may be that younger people are more aware of children's rights and therefore generally have a more positive attitude towards the child welfare system. Lastly, we find that people with a master's degree are more confident in the child welfare system than those without, and these findings are similar in the Norwegian child welfare survey (Bufetat 2006). A reason for this may be related to the anticipation that higher education is correlated with better insights into public sector and society in general, and it may also be related to the fact that overall, the service users and families involved in child welfare cases do not often have higher education.

There are also a few country-specific correlations, as women and persons with high income in the USA (California) have higher confidence in the system. Further, in England, persons with two or three children at home have more confidence than those without children and those with many (four or more) children. We do not have any particular suggestions for why this is so, other than those already mentioned.

There is a striking knowledge gap in the area of citizens' perceptions of child welfare systems; a knowledge gap that needs to be addressed. We have studied an aspect of trust that is 'superficial' in the sense that it most likely rests on the population's *impressions* of the child welfare system, and not their substantial knowledge about or identification with the system. Thus, only an unspecific type of trust – presumptive based trust – is measured. This is also the case with many of the confidence and trust studies that are undertaken. The general message is therefore that we need supplementary studies that apply other concepts of trust, such as the aforementioned knowledge based and identification based types. We also need in-depth information about the different demographic and political variables that have shown to be of importance for the levels of confidence, and why and how these connections come to be, in combination with coherent survey data gathered over time, and that is comparable across countries.

To conclude, and to bring the discussion back to the importance of trust in political systems, we believe the relatively low levels of confidence the populations have in child welfare systems clearly point to a more general legitimacy problem of governments. An important component in the contract between the electorate and the elected is missing, that is '... the expression of consent on the part of the governed ...' (Heywood 2004: 142). Child welfare systems have the authority to intervene in family matters, and, if found necessary, remove a child from his or her parents' care, and in some situations also terminate all parental rights. Citizens' trust in institutions and systems that possess such an authority to exercise extreme powers is alarmingly low. Low confidence may be due to mass media's critique and description of the sector (Gilbert *et al.* 2011). However, it may also be that even though there have been major changes in the relations between the state and the family in the last decades – women and children now having strong individual rights that are protected – there may still be a general scepticism towards a bureaucracy and the professionals that have the authority to step into the private sphere and remove children against parents' will. Nevertheless, it cannot be doubted that the role and function of child welfare systems across countries would benefit from a higher degree of trust.

Appendix

Table A1

Correlation coefficients, confidence in the three factors, by country, highest N

	Child welfare agency (CWA)			Child welfare workers (CWW)			Judges in child protection cases (JUDGES)					
	ENG	FIN	NOR	USA	ENG	FIN	NOR	USA	ENG	FIN	NOR	USA
Female	-0.0120	-0.0014	-0.0054	-0.1445 ^{***}	-0.0327	0.0447	-0.0251	-0.1878 ^{***}	0.0213	0.0320	0.0271	-0.1008 ^{***}
Left-wing	-0.0027	0.0709	0.1492	0.0797 ^{**}	0.0398	0.0893	0.1515 ^{***}	0.1091 ^{***}	0.0111	0.0076	0.1200	0.0657 [*]
High income	0.0323	0.0328	0.0163	0.2180 ^{***}	0.0713	0.0695	0.0270	0.2379 ^{***}	0.0887 ^{***}	0.0359	0.0297	0.1917 ^{***}
≥55 years old	-0.1576 ^{***}	-0.0449	-0.0912	-0.2749 ^{***}	-0.1393 ^{***}	-0.0155	-0.0585 [*]	-0.2457 ^{***}	-0.1373 ^{***}	-0.0422	-0.0957 ^{***}	-0.1681 ^{***}
Has child at home	-0.1379 ^{***}	-0.0100	-0.0103	-0.0687 [*]	-0.0956 ^{***}	-0.0146	0.0110	-0.0432	-0.1060 ^{***}	-0.0010	0.0066	-0.0183 ^{***}
Has master's degree	0.0592	0.0782	0.1143	0.2424 ^{***}	0.0660	0.1325	0.1173	0.2723 ^{***}	0.0611 [*]	0.1384	0.0879	0.2332 ^{***}

Notes: = p < 0.10. = p < 0.01.

Table A2

Correlation coefficients, three factors, whole sample

	CWA	CWW	JUDGES
Female	-0.0458***	-0.0571***	-0.0117
Left-wing	0.0979***	0.1142***	0.0451**
High income	0.0912***	0.1182***	0.1107***
≥55 years old	-0.1408***	-0.1130***	-0.1132***
Has child at home	-0.0517***	-0.0282	-0.0312***
Has master's degree	0.1342***	0.1615***	0.1423***

Notes: * = $p < 0.10$. ** = $p < 0.05$. *** = $p < 0.01$.

Table A3

Chi square table

Variable	Pearson's chi square
Education (middle school, high school, bachelor, master, doc/prof, other)	132.31***
Election recoded (right, centrist, left)	40.03***
Gender (male, female)	16.28***
Income recoded (low, average, high)	62.29***
Age groups (16–34, 35–54, 55+)	107.93***
Children under 18 in household (none, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or more, do not wish to answer)	19.75

Notes: *** = $p < 0.01$.

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Notes

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1. The question was phrased as follows: 'Most civil servants can be trusted to do what is best for the country' (ISSP 2006).
2. Civil servants are here defined by ISSP as 'higher level non-political government paid officials. They are not elected to office, they applied for their posts and are senior public servants or government administrators'.

3. The data collection process is outlined in detail on the website <http://www.uib.no/admorg/85747/survey-material#> (accessed 9 February 2015).
4. Only 579/1,000 respondents in total specified work sector, and 507 respondents answered at least two of the confidence questions in addition.

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