

Under the Watch of the State? Refugee Parents' Experiences with Surveillance in Norwegian Early Childhood Education Centers



NJMR NORDIC JOURNAL OF
MIGRATION RESEARCH

RESEARCH

ERIC KIMATHI 

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ABSTRACT

This article investigates refugee parents' experiences with surveillance by early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals in Norway on the basis of semi-structured interviews with 15 parents from refugee backgrounds. The findings reveal that these parents feel their parenting abilities are viewed with suspicion by ECEC professionals. This suspicion can lead to increased surveillance, causing parents to fear extensive state intervention in their private family lives. The study shows that parents resort to impression management strategies, including projecting conformity and engaging in open dialogue, to mitigate concerns about their parenting abilities. Their goal is to reduce suspicion and achieve minimal welfare state surveillance and intervention in their family lives.

CORRESPONDING

AUTHOR:

Eric Kimathi

Department of Global
Development and Planning,
University of Agder, NO

eric.kimathi@uia.no

KEYWORDS:

Refugee parents; ECEC
centers; Welfare state;
Surveillance; Impression
management

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kimathi, E. 2025.
Under the Watch of
the State? Refugee
Parents' Experiences with
Surveillance in Norwegian
Early Childhood Education
Centers. *Nordic Journal of
Migration Research*, 15(3):
1, pp. 1–17. DOI: [https://
doi.org/10.33134/njmr.602](https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.602)

The refugee crisis of 2015 in Europe was characterized by the arrival of more than 1 million refugees and migrants (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2015). This humanitarian emergency intensified the debates over how European countries and various actors can work toward integrating refugees. The Nordic countries are renowned for their social democratic welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1990); in Norway particularly, the public sector is comprehensive, and trust in the state is high (Rothstein 2013). Previous research (Kuusisto & Garvis 2020; Lunneblad 2017) contends that early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers are crucial arenas for integration of refugee children and parents. This is because ECEC centers are among the first public institutions with which refugee families come into contact in their host communities (Vandekerckhove & Aarssen 2020). All children younger than 5 years have the right to participate in Norwegian ECEC, but it is not mandatory.

The Framework Plan for Kindergartens in Norway (Ministry of Education and Research 2017: 48), states that ECEC centers are 'arenas that highlight linguistic and cultural diversity, and different cultural expressions [and] identities should be supported'. Despite this policy ambition and guideline for ECEC centers and professionals, previous research (Sønsthagen 2021; Tobin 2020) highlights that the underlying challenge for ECEC professionals who perform integration is related to the tensions between cultural responsiveness and the institutional guidelines and practices to which they are held accountable.

In Norway, professionals who work with children are required by law to report their concerns to the child welfare service (CWS) if they have compelling reasons to suspect child mistreatment or neglect (The Directorate for Children, Youth and Families n.d.). The threshold for reporting is low (Studsørd, Ellingsen & Willumsen 2016), and reporting can be done with or without the parent's consent. While this policy is designed to protect the welfare of children, the intervention of the state in families' lives may lead to exclusion (Handulle & Vassenden 2024). There is a need to explore how immigrant parents experience the associated nature of intrusion into the family as a form of state surveillance and social control (Herrero-Arias 2021; Tembo-Pankuku & Studsørd 2022).

This paper explores refugee parents' experiences with surveillance in Norwegian ECEC centers. The present study seeks to answer two research questions: How do refugee parents experience surveillance from ECEC professionals? How do refugee parents manage this surveillance? This study is significant for scholars and professionals in liberal democracies in North America and Europe where integration debates continue to dominate political and professional discourse, and adds to academic research that explores the complexities and challenges of welfare state led integration.

THE NORWEGIAN CONTEXT

Although initially a very homogenous country, Norway has increasingly become a diverse nation, with 16.8% of its population being immigrants or born to immigrant parents (Statistics Norway 2023). Currently, persons with refugee backgrounds account for 5.7% of the total population in Norway, that is, approximately 315,182 people (Statistics Norway 2024). In 2022, Norway resettled 35,700 refugees, which was announced as the highest number of refugees accepted by this country in a single year (Kirkeberg, 2023).

Refugees in Norway are legally required to participate in a state-run introduction program designed to aid their social, cultural, political, and economic integration. Established by the Integration Act of 2004, the introduction program not only serves refugees and their families, but also provides a general policy for labor immigrants and their descendants (Brochmann 2022: 161).

In Norway, similar to other Scandinavian countries, child-rearing is both a private and public concern (Hollekim, Anderssen & Daniel 2016). Extensive legislation on child protection and children's rights mandates that professionals uphold children's well-being. Child Welfare Services (CWS) combines roles in child protection and welfare provision (Ministry of Children and Families, 2021), and alongside schools, health stations, and ECEC centers, forms a surveillance network of state institutions and their social technologies that influences parenting practices in Norwegian society (Hennum & Aamodt 2021: 206).

European countries such as Sweden, France, Norway, and Germany have implemented parenting programs to support at-risk parents through welfare state professionals (Join-Lambert, 2016; Lundqvist, 2015; Ostner & Stolberg, 2015). In 2021, Norway amended its Integration Act to require refugees with children under 18 years to attend parental guidance courses, aiming to promote safe parenting and social integration (Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, 2021). As social technologies, parenting programs rely on specific knowledge regimes embedded within assessment manuals and training to provide expert knowledge and arrive at solutions for particular social issues (Leibetseder 2011). Previous research (Friberg & Bjørnset 2019; Handulle & Vassenden 2024; Tembo-Pankuku & Studsrød 2022) indicates mixed perceptions of the Norwegian welfare system among immigrant parents, with some appreciating its high educational and healthcare standards, while others express significant mistrust related to differing child-rearing beliefs.

IMMIGRANT PARENTS' RELATIONSHIP WITH WELFARE STATE PROFESSIONALS

Migration has diversified the characteristics of parents that welfare state professionals encounter. Research on teacher-parent interactions and how the social culture of majority groups influences immigrant parents' habitus reveal that immigrant parents face more barriers to participation due to socioeconomic challenges and issues with social and cultural integration, such as language proficiency (Barglowski, 2019; Jahreie, 2023; Norheim & Moser, 2020; Norheim, 2022).

Recent debates on immigrants and parenting have highlighted the tensions arising from universalist ideals of 'good' parenting. Notions of what is considered acceptable parenting practices are shaped by socially constructed beliefs and values that vary by context, leading to misunderstandings about positive parenting, particularly in immigrant communities in liberal democracies (Reisig & Miller, 2009). This is particularly the case in Norway, where ethnic minority parents experience demands from the state in a way that aligns with the majority culture, thus challenging their cultural understanding (Hollekim, Anderssen & Daniel 2016).

A comparative study by Križ and Skivenes (2012) between Norway and the United Kingdom reveals differing approaches of welfare state professionals toward ethnic minority parents. In Norway, child welfare workers aim to guide parents in becoming responsible and culturally acceptable, while in the UK, professionals prioritize helping minority families address social challenges. Previous research indicates that both

Norway and the United States adopt a coercive approach to parenting, resulting in extensive family surveillance and fear among parents, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds or with low socioeconomic status (Fong, 2020; Vassenden & Vedøy, 2019). While previous studies emphasize the role of child welfare services (CWS) professionals in protecting children, this study focuses on how refugee parents experience surveillance from ECEC professionals.

Despite debates over what defines ‘good’ parenting, middle-class values and norms in Norway prevail, supported by authoritative legal frameworks (Hollekim, Anderssen & Daniel, 2016; Kabatanya & Vagli, 2021). This means that the knowledge and experiences of immigrant parents tend to be silenced due to intersecting identities related to religion, race, ethnicity, social class, and culture (Fricker, 2007; Handulle & Vassenden, 2024; Kjaran & Halldórsdóttir 2022).

The increased politicization of integration has led states to implement mandatory civic integration policies that require immigrants to learn about the country’s knowledge, language, and values as conditions for immigration, settlement, and citizenship (Goodman & Wright 2015). Research (see Abu El-Haj et al. 2018; Hennum & Aamodt 2021) indicates a link between liberal states’ civic integration efforts and their aim to instill culturally dominant norms. Welfare state professionals play a role in establishing and reinforcing acceptable practices. While mandatory socio-cultural integration conditions, such as those related to parenting, may elevate immigrants’ status among state bureaucrats, they also highlight the symbolic control and cultural assimilation tendencies present in state-led integration efforts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand how refugee parents navigate perceived surveillance in ECEC centers, I draw on Goffman’s symbolic interactionism, particularly his concepts of impression management (1959) and stigma (1963). Goffman (1959) explored everyday interaction rituals, likening social life to a theater where everyday interactions can be understood as a performance taking place in front of an audience.

Goffman’s notion of stigma refers to individuals who are ‘disqualified from full social acceptance’, arising within social contexts and serving as a means of social control (1963: 9). Stigma has a categorizing effect, shaping how social attitudes and practices are perceived and understood (Hacking 2004: 18). Stigma involves reactions to perceived negative deviance and can manifest as public stigma or self-stigma, which is the experience or anticipation of stigma (Bos et al. 2013: 2). Self-stigma is a form of consciousness highlighting the process in which people are explicitly aware that they are being targeted because of an identity that is devalued in a specific social context (Goffman’s 1963). In this paper, I use Goffman’s work on stigma to analytically explore refugee parents’ experiences with surveillance, their anticipation of social disapproval, and the strategies they employ to manage real or perceived stigma relating to parenting practices.

Exploring how parents navigate the consequences of visible and perceived stigma is crucial, as they are not merely passive victims but actively work to mitigate its negative effects. People often use impression management (Goffman 1963: 5), where they modify their behavior to neutralize, confirm, or contest cultural stereotypes to maintain ‘desirability’ (Goffman 1959). Previous studies (Lamont et al. 2016; Thiagarajah & Orupabo 2023) have examined how ethnic minorities respond to

discrimination and stigma, highlighting confrontation and impression management to be common strategies.

The focus here is on how individuals manage stigma by choreographing social interactions to create a managed impression, with an intention to influence outcomes of their everyday experiences (Goffman 1983: 45). Goffman's concepts of frontstage and backstage provide valuable insights into how parents navigate surveillance. The frontstage represents the space where interactions with an audience occur, while the backstage is a private area where participants can relax and be their unchoreographed, authentic selves (Goffman 1959).

Impression management involves strategies such as passing and covering (Goffman 1963). In passing, individuals choose to conceal their stigma to appear 'normal', though they remain 'discreditable' since the stigma can still emerge (Goffman 1963). Covering, furthermore, entails restricting the display of one's shortcomings to avoid association with the stigma, employing strategies such as selective disclosure and compensatory efforts, including over-expressiveness, isolation, and projection.

Goffman's (1959) concept of 'two-team interaction' is pertinent here, as it emphasizes how human interaction is centered on the exchange of information about oneself. This notion is useful to describe the interactions between ECEC professionals and refugee parents, who engage in 'a kind of dialogue' to share insights about their realities and those of the children in their care.

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on interviews with refugee parents at Norwegian ECEC centers, conducted between October 2019 and October 2021. Participants were required to have a refugee background and children enrolled in a Norwegian ECEC center. To recruit participants, I used snowball sampling, which was both convenient and effective given my lack of prior contacts at the research site (Clark, Foster & Bryman 2019: 170).

The recruited participants came from East and Central Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Eurasia. The term 'refugee' is often linked to racialized minority groups facing discrediting stigma due to factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, or culture (Valenta & Bunar 2010). Participants ranged in age from 27 to 55 years, with children between 1 and 5 years old. Their length of residence in Norway varied from 1 to 22 years. Despite this variation, there were no noticeable differences in how parents discussed their experiences with surveillance from welfare state professionals. However, those who had lived in Norway longer reported feeling a sense of stability for their families, which they attributed to a better understanding of the socio-cultural and political systems and satisfactory proficiency in Norwegian. Some participants had recently completed the introductory program and were unemployed, while others were engaged in vocational or formal education, and some held professional roles, such as administrative advisors and healthcare workers.

All interviews with parents were conducted in English, except for two: one in Kiswahili, a shared language between me and the participant, and the other in a mix of English and Norwegian. I began with a focus group interview in October 2019 at an ECEC center, while individual interviews were held in various settings on the basis of participants' preferences. Plans for additional focus group meetings were disrupted

by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, but I was able to conduct one-on-one interviews during the lockdown periods in Norway. The single focus group proved beneficial, as it generated similar perspectives to those that emerged in individual interviews. This group setting provided a different dynamic, allowing participants to respond to each other's comments.

I conducted seven individual interviews between August 2020 and October 2021 in various locations, including university meeting rooms, outdoor areas, the city's public library, and two restaurants. The shortest interview lasted 45 minutes, the longest 90 minutes, and the focus group session lasted 2.5 hours. All sessions were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed in English.

Guided by institutional ethnography (Smith 2005), the analysis aimed to map parents' accounts descriptively, involving an interrogation of the interview material and the selection of excerpts to identify potential puzzles (McCoy 2006). The refugee parents' descriptions of their interactions with ECEC professionals provided insights into the social relationships that shape their navigation of parenting expectations.

The present study received research approval from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research in February 2019. I adhered to research ethics as outlined by the Norwegian National Committees for Research Ethics guidelines (National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, 2010). Before the interviews began, participants received written information and provided written consent to participate and have their interviews recorded. All participants and references to their children in the quotes have been anonymized to uphold ethical responsibility toward both parents and children.

As an immigrant to Norway myself, I was in a useful position to build rapport with the participants. However, during the interviews, I became aware that my status as an academic researcher meant that I occupied a position of knowledge superiority. Some refugees perceived that we had common experiences as immigrants relating to navigating cultural differences, learning the Norwegian language, and being a minority in social settings, which made my access to them easier, while others were reluctant due to various social differences, for example, religion and gender. Reflexivity regarding my position as a non-Norwegian researcher was essential in understanding my relationship with participants. While I, too, am labeled a foreigner, the refugees' experiences – as parents with diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds – distanced me from their realities. This awareness of both our similarities and differences informed my inquiry (Kimathi 2023). I took extra care organizing and conducting interviews with the refugees because they are considered a vulnerable group (McLaughlin & Alfaro-Velcamp 2015). This involved avoiding intrusive questions and respecting their choice regarding how and where the interviews were conducted.

PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE OF SURVEILLANCE AMONG REFUGEE PARENTS

Findings from this study indicate that refugee parents felt that ECEC professionals monitored their parenting, with interactions often characterized by suspicion. Parents reported feeling apprehensive about discussing their children's behavior or home relationships, viewing such inquiries as intrusions into their private lives. Questions about their relationships with their children were interpreted as a form of surveillance regarding their parenting abilities.

For example, George, a refugee who has lived in Norway for more than 10 years, completed graduate-level education, and possesses satisfactory Norwegian language skills, shared the following:

I have always said that at kindergarten there is a perception that professionals are very keen to find out how you and your kid are behaving. They want to see if there is any possible tension at home ... My friends have said that there is more attention or more curiosity toward parents from other cultures and countries because there is a feeling that there is a lack of capacity for taking care of kids (George).

The interview revealed that parents feared potential consequences of surveillance, although the fear was not necessarily based on their own experiences. For example, Kevin, who has lived in Norway for a couple of years and worked in manual jobs such as construction and janitorial work without higher education, discussed the follow-up work that professionals conduct with parents and children. His quote illustrated a form of reverse suspicion toward ECEC professionals, conveying a sense that the parents are being watched. In some cases, this perception of surveillance could lead to even further scrutiny.

At the kindergarten, they monitor the relations of the child and the parent and compile a report. If anything happens at home and the child does not get some things, the information is sent to the government ... You are reported to the CWS, which looks after children whose care is deemed inadequate or in an unsafe environment (Kevin).

It was unclear from the participant's accounts whether refugee parents fully understood why ECEC professionals were concerned about how they practiced parenting. However, the parents seemed to recognize that ECEC staff collaborate with other state agencies, such as Child Welfare Services (CWS), suggesting that some form of surveillance is involved to protect children from harmful environments. This interprofessional collaboration aims to safeguard children's well-being, but made parents who are of ethnic minority backgrounds feel surveilled. This perception may contribute to their experience of self-stigma.

The study found that ECEC professionals encouraged parents, particularly refugees, to participate in parenting programs such as the International Child Development Program (ICDP), which has since been made mandatory in many municipalities in Norway. This study took place prior to the amendment of the Norwegian Integration Act in 2021, which made participation in parenting programs mandatory for all refugees with children under 18 years. The goal of parenting programs is to help parents gain better parenting skills and promote integration. While refugee parents expressed a desire to learn new strategies, some felt pressured to enroll in the ICDP to avoid scrutiny from ECEC professionals, whom they viewed as extensions of the state enforcing normative practices and knowledge on parenting. A quote from Astrid, who was a student and married mother of two children, reflects how parents' fears of being viewed as problematic influenced their decision to join the parenting program.

In [the] ICDP, they teach the parents how to handle problems with their children. Most immigrant parents are afraid to be reported to CWS because it is perceived that if the child doesn't behave accordingly and you punish the child, he/she will be taken away on the basis that you don't know how

to take care of the child ... Therefore, my aim in taking this course is to help myself first and some people like me who are afraid of doing something with the children because of fear of the government system, that is, ECEC, CWS (Astrid).

The interviews with the parents revealed that they felt compelled to join the parenting program to counteract fears of surveillance, particularly the threat of losing their children to Child Welfare Services (CWS). The parents appeared to be worried that their children might provide misleading accounts of their family lives, especially regarding their experiences in their countries of origin, which could lead to increased scrutiny from ECEC and CWS professionals. The study indicates that there are different norms and ideals surrounding childhood and the view of children between parents and the ECEC professionals, which could affect the interactions between the two respective groups. Although none had been reported to CWS, the fear persisted among the parents, as the example of Lars, who worked in a healthcare center, exemplifies below.

Interviewer. You have talked about those parents who fear being very open to the kindergarten staff because they are told that they are being monitored. Where does this information that causes fear come from?

Lars: Some parents don't know what else to do when a child is wrong; they may resort to unacceptable ways of ensuring discipline, and then the child reports to the kindergarten workers and the CWS is then called in to investigate.

Interviewer: So, you think that the parents fear because there are things that they do at home that make them afraid?

Lars: Not only that, language is very important; the moment the child begins learning Norwegian, you will find that he/she will begin saying some things that were done to him/her a while ago in their country of birth but not here. I see the culture in Norway is that they believe that children never lie, but where I come from, they say a child can lie, so you find that whatever the child says here, they closely follow up on that. Poor communication or lack of language can result in a misunderstanding, which may lead to a major problem. Understanding the culture here usually eliminates such situations.

The interview excerpt illustrates how cultural differences in parenting, language barriers, and varying perceptions of childhood influence parents' interactions with ECEC centers, particularly regarding their fears of state surveillance. In Norway, children are seen as having the agency to speak for themselves, which may not align with views in other cultures. Parents expressed concern that miscommunication between professionals and children could erode trust in their parenting practices and lead to stigma, especially if they were perceived as using culturally or legally inappropriate strategies.

STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE FURTHER SURVEILLANCE

Parents employed impression management to cope with ECEC staff surveillance, which involved two strategies, that is, projecting conformity to dominant parenting ideals and engaging in open dialogue. Regarding projecting conformity, the study indicates that parents' motivation was linked to the desire to create a positive impression with

ECEC professionals. Anne's quote illustrates how parents chose to align with majority cultural practices, particularly concerning food and play, to address this surveillance.

If I stay here longer, the best thing, I think, is to adopt the Norwegian way because it makes things easier to integrate and not always to be in trouble. Otherwise, if you stick to your ways, you tend to have worries and may have difficulties fitting in (Anne).

The findings revealed that participants were clearly fearful of being judged or labeled as 'bad' parents. They sought to be perceived as 'good' parents by conforming to dominant ideals. This strategy helped them create a positive impression and avoid stigma associated with differing parenting beliefs and practices, as illustrated by Maya's quote.

When you come from our culture (East African), initially, the routines and practices are harder to adapt to. Sometimes, it's very cold and wet, and you want your child to be indoors, and you have to make it look like you are happy with the practices at the kindergarten. Also, I have concerns about cultural differences relating to food, because we get instructions on what to pack and more often bread is recommended... when my child is crying, normally, we would go soothe and help the baby, but here, they leave the child to cry. Those are the rules, and you have to show that you have adapted like everyone else (Maya).

The study, as well as the account of Maya, who was married and worked in a volunteer organization, highlights that parents aimed to appear happy about ECEC activities to show they had adapted, seeking to avoid being labeled as having undesirable parenting traits and striving for social acceptance. They projected conformity to the rules and activities in the ECEC center, revealing a form of impression management (Goffman 1959). While the parents displayed agreement with ECEC professionals in public, some parents like Maya appeared to question the ECEC professionals' and broadly the state's approach to handling children.

The study indicates that parents also used dialogue as an impression management strategy to manage perceived surveillance. In situations where they felt questioned, the parents' accounts show that they openly asserted their parenting beliefs by expressing them to the ECEC professionals. Linn, a single mother who arrived in Norway in her 20s without formal education, illustrated this approach, expressing herself aimed at protecting herself and to mitigate surveillance.

Linn: I can remember in the past, I was told about how to take care of children ... I came here when I was 26 with two kids, and they saw a woman who cannot take good care of the young children. I felt bad because there were younger Norwegian mothers who weren't told the things they had told me. They said I needed parenting support from CWS, but I said I was fine, but I feared my children would be taken by CWS because I had heard many stories of it happening to others in Norway.

Interviewer: But there are many people below that age who have children.

Linn: It is different for the citizens of this country because they are perceived to know a lot about the rights of their children. You know, in my region X [name anonymized], we raise kids differently, so the ECEC

professionals may perceive that you don't know how to bring up children because it is not their way of doing it.

Interviewer: Were you able to explain that you can take good care of your kids?

Linn: I can remember the day I talked to the woman in the ECEC center and told her! No, it cannot be possible. These are my children, and I cannot fail to understand how to take good care of them. She was silent and never raised the matter again.

In the study, the parents appear open and confident in their interactions with ECEC professionals. The conversation by Linn reveals that a parent's confidence in explaining her viewpoint can be helpful as a strategy to manage the perceived surveillance. While professionals engage in surveillance as part of their work responsibility, it can create tension with parents. This suggests that parents need to prepare for how to navigate these perceptions and potential surveillance. Unlike the parents who projected to conform to Norwegian parenting norms, the dialogue approach allows parents to discuss and disagree with professionals openly, without feeling the need to hide their real selves. However, this openness does not eliminate the possibility of further surveillance or change their status as immigrant parents.

The study indicates that the parents aimed to be recognized as 'good' and to have their ability to care for their children acknowledged. Through dialogue, they sought to share their cultural perspectives on parenting, hoping that ECEC professionals would be understanding rather than judgmental. Ida's quote below exemplifies how parents express their knowledge and practices of child-rearing on the basis of their cultural backgrounds. She candidly addresses cultural differences in the way parents communicate with children.

It is different how I raise children in my culture, and I try to explain to the people working in the kindergarten so that they understand why, and if they understand, I think then they won't judge us as not good parents. Here in Norway, the children have more say in what is happening, but in my country, children just listen to adults, and if they misbehave, you can give them a strong warning. Maybe I jokingly say to the child, 'I will throw you through the window if you repeat that', but here, you cannot say that. The child may mention that in kindergarten, and quickly, CWS will be at your door asking why I threatened to kill my child. Our parents did that as a way of warning, and it is accepted, even though they wouldn't harm us, and the people at the kindergarten here need to understand that it is a cultural way of parenting. (Ida)

The study findings reveal that the perceived surveillance refugee parents experience is linked to tensions between their cultural parenting practices and institutional guidelines that ECEC professionals are accountable to. Ole, who has postgraduate education and a formal job, illustrates how parents navigate these differences and seek openness from ECEC staff. Like Ida, Ole engaged in dialogue with the professionals to address a challenge with his daughter's feeding. While a cultural practice of forcefully feeding a child might invite criticism from the professionals, Ole used it to foster an open dialogue with the professionals, leading to a seemingly mutually agreeable solution.

As an immigrant parent, if your child doesn't eat, you have to force him/her to eat and give her/him the food as much as you can. This is normal practice in our culture, but in Norwegian culture, they ask the child if they want more food, and if they say no, they don't apply any pressure. This cannot be okay for some of us parents, who then disagree with the staff on this. I think some 'pushing' should be done to get the child to eat, but then the staff in the kindergarten perceive [that] we are mistreating children. Therefore, we had to find a solution together with the kindergarten staff. We are good when holding discussions with them (Ole).

Ole's quote highlights that parents view dialogue as a strategy to navigate parenting differences with ECEC professionals. The study indicates that parents believe that a lack of cultural understanding among professionals often leads to misunderstandings about what is considered concerning behavior. In addition, parents are appreciative of the opportunity for open dialogue, which enables them to explain their cultural practices, such as feeding children, even if these differ from the majority culture. The findings suggest that dialogue allows parents to be heard, fostering partnerships rather than imposing universal parenting expectations, which can strain parent-professional relationships. In recounting their dialogues, parents did not express feelings of mistrust or surveillance in their interactions with professionals.

DISCUSSION

Refugee parents' interactions with Norwegian ECEC staff involve complex power dynamics and reveal symbolic hierarchies. In the interactions, parents navigate tensions between their own cultural parenting knowledge and the dominant norms of 'good' parenting upheld by the professionals in the ECEC centers (Hennum & Aamodt 2021). The study indicates that parents are expected to understand the Norwegian cultural framework of childhood and parenting while finding ways to integrate this with their identities and cultural orientations (Herrero-Arias 2021).

The current study shows that refugee parents perceive themselves as experiencing surveillance from ECEC professionals and thus from Norwegian state bureaucracy, which can feel intrusive to parents and lead to feelings of fear of consequences relating to the surveillance, as other previous studies show (Friberg & Bjørnset 2019; Handulle & Vassenden 2021; Herrero-Arias 2021; Handulle & Vassenden 2024). This experience must be understood within the child-centric Nordic welfare model, which prioritizes children's welfare (Handulle & Vassenden 2021: 471). In this model, care and parenting are seen as both private and public responsibilities, with the state playing a significant role in the welfare of children and families (Esping-Andersen 1990). Consequently, tensions arise between the Nordic welfare state model and the refugees' cultural understanding of parenting and the role of the state.

In this study, parents expressed concerns that ECEC professionals viewed their child-rearing practices with suspicion that they were not 'good', leading to feelings of self-stigma (Goffman 1963) when anticipating interactions with ECEC professionals. Their parenting practices are confronted by a perceived negative deviance, which expresses their notion of socially defined stigma (Bos et al. 2013: 2).

This study revealed that the expectation to conform to state-sanctioned norms of parenting became a marker distinguishing 'good' parents from others. Parents who did not meet the ideal of the 'good' parent risked disqualification from social acceptance

(Goffman 1963: 9), leading to increased surveillance and its potential consequences. The Norwegian state's coercive capacity, characterized by intrusive monitoring of parents, is evident, echoing findings from previous studies in Norway and the United States (Fong 2020: 660; Lamont et al. 2016; Vassenden & Vedøy 2019). While these studies primarily focus on Child Welfare Services (CWS), my research offers insights into refugee parents' perspectives on surveillance within Norwegian ECEC centers.

This study indicates that parents expressed a perception of surveillance and fears linked to the consequences associated with it particularly because of their identity of having racialized minority backgrounds. This study demonstrated that parents employed impression management in two ways to cope with surveillance and stigma. Firstly, they projected conformity to dominant norms. As the findings revealed, parents aimed to create the impression that they adhered to the majority's parenting practices to be seen as 'good' parents. Even in situations that made them uncomfortable, the parents indicated they remained silent and appeared to approve of practices – such as outdoor play and food selection – to mitigate surveillance.

The need to manage impressions arises when parents feel surveilled by ECEC professionals. They are acutely aware of the importance of presenting themselves well during interactions, aiming to portray an image of 'good' parents as expected by the welfare state bureaucracy. This leads to a necessity for parents to regulate their behavior according to normative standards of parenthood to counter potential stigma associated with the labels and stereotypes linked to their identities, values, and daily realities (Handulle & Vassenden 2021; Tembo-Pankuku, Studsrød & Young 2021). The parents noted that it was easier to project conformity to dominant parenting practices, as this made their everyday lives easier, and they hoped it would mitigate surveillance from ECEC professionals.

This study found that parents attended parenting courses, such as the ICDP, where they received training on effective parenting practices. Participation in this program was intended to help parents develop competence as 'good' parents on the basis of universalized knowledge regimes of parenting. However, this study indicates that this was not the parents' primary motivation for joining the ICDP. Instead, it was a form of impression management, in which they believed that being seen by ECEC professionals involved in the program – some of whom serve as parenting mentors – would earn them approval as 'good' parents, thereby mitigating surveillance and its potential consequences. This therefore shows that the parents were again projecting conformity.

This can be seen as a form of covering strategy by the parents to compensate for any perceived stigma and to be seen as 'good' parents, which would protect them from being discredited (Goffman 1959). In this case, participation in the ICDP is a pseudo-assimilative technique for the parents, whose intent is not only to cover but also to restrict any parenting stereotypes that could attract surveillance (Goffman 1963: 127). However, the parents' accounts reveal that their goal in ICDP was not to reject their own cultural identity and assimilate fully into the majority norms of parenting.

The second impression management strategy employed by parents was open dialogue. Unlike the strategy of projecting conformity, this approach allowed parents to confidently express their own experiences, and at times, they expressed contrasting viewpoints to those of ECEC professionals. The contrasting viewpoints may shed light on a lack of cultural understanding between parents and professionals in relation to parenting, a finding which is consistent with previous studies (Kabatanya & Vagli

2021; Sønsthagen 2021; Tobin 2020). Parents' willingness to challenge issues related to parenting was notably bold, given the symbolic power that professionals hold as representatives of the welfare state. By doing so, parents risked being labeled as problematic, which could lead to intensified surveillance.

Open dialogue as an impression management strategy involves parents explaining themselves to ECEC professionals to neutralize or contest perceived stigma on the basis of cultural stereotypes, thereby maintaining their 'desirability' as capable parents (Goffman 1959). Using Goffman's analogy of two teams, the interaction with parents can be seen as a performance largely dictated by ECEC professionals. According to Goffman (1959: 96), such a performance is rooted in 'a need for cooperation'. However, on the basis of the parents' accounts in this study, the extent to which the interaction between ECEC professionals and parents is egalitarian remains unclear. This might impede the ambition to achieve meaningful cooperation. While the benefits of Nordic welfare state professionals' involvement in supporting parenting and children are well documented (Friberg & Bjørnset 2019), this study highlights how parent-professional interactions are often dominated by hegemonic and hierarchical structures, leading to the marginalization of parents' experiences and realities, which is a form of epistemic injustice by ECEC professionals (Fricker 2007; Handulle & Vassenden 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I explored the perspectives of refugee parents regarding surveillance from ECEC professionals. The findings reveal that parents perceive that ECEC professionals are suspicious of their capacity to be 'good' parents on the basis of normative parenting ideals, which contributes to their fear of surveillance. This fear is linked to the potential consequences they may face from welfare state professionals. The study indicates that parents resort to impression management through projecting conformity and engaging in open dialogue. Impression management thus serves as a form of self-protection, helping to mitigate the marginalization of their parenting knowledge and capacity, thereby giving them the optimism of facing minimal surveillance from ECEC professionals.

The implications of the study are that perception of surveillance and the fear expressed by parents reveal that interactions are likely to be characterized by more suspicion, and this can compromise the possibility of establishing meaningful cooperation in the ECEC centers. Additionally, ECEC professionals face the challenge of identifying effective strategies to foster more diversity-friendly ways of organizing and doing integration work that minimize or eliminate the stigma associated with migrant identities and parenting strategies in their daily interactions.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Eric Kimathi  orcid.org/0000-0001-9463-2700
Department of Global Development and Planning, University of Agder, NO

Kimathi
Nordic Journal of
Migration Research
DOI: 10.33134/njmr.602

REFERENCES

- Abu El-Haj, T.R., Kaloustian, G., Wesley Bonet, S. and Chatila, S.** 2018. 'Fifi the Punishing Cat and other civic lessons from a Lebanese public kindergarten school', *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, 4(1), p. 13. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17609/xnpr-ce74>
- Barglowski, K.** 2019. 'Migrants' class and parenting: the role of cultural capital in migrants' inequalities in education', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(11), pp. 1970–1987. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1476130>
- Bos, A.E., Pryor, J.N., Reeder, G.D., and Stutterheim, S.E.** 2013. 'Stigma: advances in theory and research', *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 35(1), pp. 1–9. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2012.746147>
- Brochmann, G.** 2022. 'Inclusion under pressure: the case of Norway', in Koning, AE (ed.). *The Exclusion of Immigrants from Welfare Programs*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487544355-010>
- Clark, T., Foster, L. and Bryman, A.** 2019. *How to do your social research project or dissertation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780198811060.001.0001>
- Esping-Andersen, G.** 1990. *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/095892879100100108>
- Fong, K.** 2020. 'Getting eyes in the home: child protective services investigations and state surveillance of family life', *American Sociological Review*, 85(4), pp. 610–638. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122420938460>
- Friberg, J. and Bjørnset, M.** 2019. *Migrasjon, foreldreskap og sosial kontroll* [Migration, parenting and social control] (Rapport 2019:01). Oslo: Fafo.
- Fricker, M.** 2007. *Epistemic injustice: power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.0001>
- Goffman, E.** 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: The Overlook Press.
- Goffman, E.** 1963. *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Goffman, E.** 1983. 'The interaction order: American Sociological Association, 1982 presidential address', *American Sociological Review*, 48(1), pp. 1–17. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095141>
- Goodman, S.W. and Wright, M.** 2015. 'Does mandatory integration matter? Effects of civic requirements on immigrant socio-economic and political outcomes', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(12), pp. 1885–1908. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1042434>
- Hacking, I.** 2004. 'Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman: between discourse in the abstract and face-to-face interaction', *Economy and Society*, 33(3), pp. 277–302. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0308514042000225671>
- Handulle, A. and Vassenden, A.** 2021. "'The art of kindergarten drop off': how young Norwegian-Somali parents perform ethnicity to avoid reports to child welfare services", *European Journal of Social Work*, 24(3), pp. 469–480. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1713053>

- Handulle, A. and Vassenden, A.** 2024. 'Transmission of child removal stories among Norwegian Somalis: an interactionist analysis of ethnic minority parents' fears of child welfare services', *Acta Sociologica*, 67(2), pp. 198–214. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00016993231177548>
- Hennum, N. and Aamodt, H.** 2021. 'The place of children in the imaginary of welfare states', *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 9(2), pp. 205–217. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986020X16031177678958>
- Herrero-Arias, R.** 2021. Negotiating parenting culture, identity, and belonging: the experiences of Southern European parents raising their children in Norway. PhD thesis. University of Bergen. Available at: <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/handle/11250/2757229> [Last accessed 20 February 2022].
- Hollekim, R., Anderssen, N. and Daniel, M.** 2016. 'Contemporary discourses on children and parenting in Norway: Norwegian Child Welfare Services meets immigrant families', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 60, pp. 52–60. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.11.004>
- Jahreie, J.** 2023. 'Towards a renewed understanding of barriers to immigrant parents' involvement in education', *Acta Sociologica*, 66(3), pp. 307–321. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00016993221110870>
- Join-Lambert, H.** 2016. 'Parental involvement and multi-agency support services for high-need families in France', *Social Policy and Society*, 15(2), pp. 317–329. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746415000706>
- Kabatanya, C.L. and Vagli, Å.** 2021. 'Parenting in double translation: lived experiences of Ugandan immigrant parents in Norway', *Nordic Social Work Research*, 11(1), pp. 77–89. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2019.1644531>
- Kimathi, E.** 2023. 'Negotiating positionality within institutional ethnography as a non-native researcher in Norway', in Magnussen, ML and Nilsen ACE (eds.) *Erfaringer med institusjonell etnografi*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk. pp. 251–268. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.195.ch12>
- Kirkeberg, M.I.** 2023. Høyeste antall flyktninger noensinne. (Highest number of refugees ever). *Statistics Norway*, 5 July. Available at: <https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/innvandrer/statistikk/innvandrer-etter-innvandringsgrunn/artikler/hoyeste-antall-flyktninger-noensinne> [Last accessed 8 October 2023].
- Kjara, J.I. and Halldórsdóttir, B.E.** 2022. 'Epistemic violence toward immigrant women in Iceland', *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 12(3), pp. 346–360. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.499>
- Križ, K. and Skivenes, M.** 2012. 'Child-centric or family focused? A study of child welfare workers' perceptions of ethnic minority children in England and Norway', *Child & Family Social Work*, 17(4), pp. 448–457. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2011.00802.x>
- Kuusisto, A. and Garvis, S.** 2020. 'Superdiversity and the Nordic model in ECEC', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 21(4), pp. 279–283. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120983619>
- Lamont, M., Silva, G.M., Welburn, J.S., Guetzkow, J., Mizrahi, N., Herzog, H. and Reis, E.** 2016. *Getting respect: responding to stigma and discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv346qr9>
- Leibetseder, B.** 2011. 'A critical review on the concept of social technology', *Social Technologies*, 1(1), pp. 7–24.
- Lundqvist, Å.** 2015. 'Parenting support in Sweden: new policies in old settings', *Social Policy and Society*, 14(4), pp. 657–668. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746415000238>

- Lunneblad, J.** 2017. 'Integration of refugee children and their families in the Swedish preschool: strategies, objectives and standards', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25(3), pp. 359–369. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1308162>
- McCoy, L.** 2006. 'Keeping the institution in view: working with interview accounts of everyday experience', in D.E. Smith (ed.). *Institutional ethnography as practice*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. pp. 109–126.
- McLaughlin, R.H. and Alfaro-Velcamp, T.** 2015. 'The vulnerability of immigrants in research: enhancing protocol development and ethics review', *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 13(1), pp. 27–43. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-015-9225-7>
- Ministry of Children and Families.** 2021. *Lov om barneverntjenester (Child Protection Act) (barnevernloven)*. Announced on 18 June 2021. Available at: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2021-06-18-97> [Last accessed 3 June 2022].
- Ministry of Education and Research.** 2017. *Framework plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens*. Oslo. Available at: <https://www.udir.no/globalassets/filer/barnehage/rammeplan/framework-plan-for-kindergartens2-2017.pdf> [Last accessed 20 August 2018].
- Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion.** 2021. *Integration Act*. Oslo: Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion. Available at: https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2020-11-06-127/KAPITTEL_4#KAPITTEL_4 [Last accessed 2 September 2021].
- National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities.** 2010. *Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, law and the humanities*. National Committees for Research Ethics in Norway. Available at: <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/globalassets/dokumenter/4-publikasjoner-som-pdf/tidligere-versjoner/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences-law-and-the-humanities-2006.pdf> [Last accessed 4 August 2018].
- Norheim, H.** 2022. *Partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in early childhood education and care*. PhD thesis. University of South-Eastern Norway. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/2839429> [Last accessed 15 October 2023].
- Norheim, H. and Moser, T.** 2020. 'Barriers and facilitators for partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in ECEC: a review based on empirical research', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 28(6), pp. 789–805. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1836582>
- Ostner, I. and Stolberg, C.** 2015. 'Investing in children, monitoring parents: parenting support in the changing German welfare state', *Social Policy and Society*, 14(4), pp. 621–632. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746415000287>
- Reisig, J.A. and Miller, M.K.** 2009. 'How the social construction of "child abuse" affect immigrant parents: policy changes that protect children and families', *International Journal of Social Inquiry*, 2(1), pp. 17–37.
- Rothstein, B.** 2013. 'Corruption and social trust: why the fish rots from the head down', *Social Research*, 80(4), pp. 1009–1032. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2013.0040>
- Smith, D.E.** 2005. *Institutional ethnography: a sociology for people*. Maryland: Rowman Altamira.
- Sønsthagen, A.G.** 2021. *Leadership and responsibility: a study of early childcare institutions as inclusion arenas for parents with refugee backgrounds*. PhD thesis. University of South-Eastern Norway. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/2838377> (Last accessed 4 May 2022).

- Statistics Norway.** 2023. Innvandrere og norskfødte med innvanderforeldre (Immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents). Available at: <https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/innvandrere/statistikk/innvandrere-og-norskfodte-med-innvanderforeldre> [Last accessed 12 September 2024].
- Statistics Norway.** 2024. Personer med flyktningbakgrunn (Persons with refugee background). Available at: <https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/innvandrere/statistikk/personer-med-flyktningbakgrunn> [Last accessed 8 October 2024].
- Studsørd, I., Ellingsen, I.T. and Willumsen, E.** 2016. 'When the Norwegian child-welfare services get involved: parents making sense of referrals', *European Journal of Social Work*, 19(6), pp. 946–962. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2015.1081584>
- Tembo-Pankuku, M.J. and Studsørd, I.** 2022. 'Defining "good enough" parenting: ambiguities when immigrant parents migrate to interventionist and child-centric Western countries—The case of Norway', in R. Baikady, S. Sajid, J. Przeperski, V. Nadesan, I. Rezaul, J. Gao. (eds.). *The Palgrave handbook of global social problems*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. pp. 1–17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68127-2_87-1
- Tembo-Pankuku, M.J., Studsørd, I. and Young, S.** 2021. 'Governing the family: immigrant parents' perceptions of the controlling power of the Norwegian welfare system', *European Journal of Social Work*, 24(3), pp. 492–503. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1738349>
- The Directorate for Children, Youth and Families.** (n.d.). Bekymringsmeldinger til barnevernet (Reports of concern to child protection). Available at: <https://www.bufdir.no/statistikk-og-analyse/barnevern/bekymringsmeldinger-til-barnevernet/#section-38> [Last accessed 10 July 2023].
- Thiyagarajah, M. and Orupabo, J.** 2023. 'Å spille på norskhet for å få en sjans: stigmahåndtering hos unge jobbsøkere med innvanderbakgrunn [Gambling on Norwegianness to get a chance: stigma management in young jobseekers with an immigrant background]', *Søkelys på Arbeidslivet*, 40(3), pp. 1–14. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18261/spa.40.3.2>
- Tobin, J.** 2020. 'Addressing the needs of children of immigrants and refugee families in contemporary ECEC settings: findings and implications from the Children Crossing Borders study', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 28(1), pp. 10–20. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1707359>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.** 2015. *Over one million sea arrivals reach Europe*. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/over-one-million-sea-arrivals-reach-europe-2015> [Last accessed 24 August 2018].
- Valenta, M. and Bunar, N.** 2010. 'State assisted integration: refugee integration policies in Scandinavian welfare states: The Swedish and Norwegian experience', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23(4), pp. 463–483. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feq028>
- Vandekerckhove, A. and Aarssen, J.** 2020. 'High time to put the invisible children on the agenda: supporting refugee families and children through quality ECEC', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 28(1), pp. 104–114. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1707366>
- Vassenden, A. and Vedøy, G.** 2019. 'Recurrence, eruptions, and a transnational turn: three decades of strained relations between migrants to Norway and the child welfare services', *Child & Family Social Work*, 24(4), pp. 582–591. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12639>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kimathi, E. 2025.
 Under the Watch of
 the State? Refugee
 Parents' Experiences with
 Surveillance in Norwegian
 Early Childhood Education
 Centers. *Nordic Journal of
 Migration Research*, 15(3):
 1, pp. 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.602>

Submitted: 02 September
 2022

Accepted: 04 November
 2024

Published: 22 January
 2025

COPYRIGHT:

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons NonCommercial-NoDerivatives Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits unrestricted distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, the material is not used for commercial purposes and is not altered in any way. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Nordic Journal of Migration Research is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.