Becoming a bad mother: exploring ruling relations in the Norwegian welfare state from the standpoint of a Somali single parent

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In this article, I investigate the social organising of a process leading up to a Somali single parent I call Maryam receiving a letter from the Norwegian child protection services (CPS). Using institutional ethnography, I show how Maryam's experience is shaped by generalised, objectified understandings that transcend the relations she has at specific points in time; by what Dorothy Smith labels ruling relations. Based on Maryam's story about the process leading up to the letter from the CPS, but also on documents connected to her case and other interviews with her, I show how she is constructed as a mother lacking knowledge and needing help, and how she is constructed as a suspicious mother when she declines this help – and the role of generalising, objectifying understandings in this process.

Key words institutional ethnography • disjuncture • mothering • migration • welfare state professionals

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Introduction

One evening some years ago, a woman I shall call Maryam sent me a text message, asking if we could meet urgently. Maryam came as a refugee from Somalia to the region of Agder around ten years earlier. I had driven to the city she lived in and interviewed her several times about her everyday life as a single parent of five children and the process of trying to get a job. This was, however, the first time Maryam herself initiated an interview. Meeting her a few days later, she looked tired and told me that she had not slept properly for two months. The reason was that the child protection services (CPS) had sent her a letter. The letter stated that her children’s school had contacted them and that the CPS was going to evaluate/investigate (undersøke) her and her family for a period of three months. Maryam was supposed to meet them for the first time the following week.

In this article, I explore Maryam's experience of the process culminating in this letter from the CPS and documents used in this process. More specifically, I use understandings and tools from institutional ethnography to investigate how
Maryam’s experience is ‘socially organised’ through being shaped in and by the social relations it involves (Smith, 2005). Doing institutional ethnography, making visible how a certain experience is shaped in and by social relations does not only mean identifying people – including for example welfare state professionals – who contribute to shaping what happens. It also means making visible how people draw on or are ‘hooked into’ generalised, objectified ways of understanding or organising human activity that transcend the relations they have with specific others at specific points in time; what Dorothy Smith (2005) labels ‘trans-local’ or ‘ruling’ relations. In this article, I unfold Maryam’s experience of this process. Based on her story about the process, but also documents connected to her case and my earlier interviews with her, I show how she is constructed as a mother lacking knowledge and needing help, and how she is constructed as a suspicious mother when she declines this help – and the role of generalising, objectifying understandings in this process. I end the article by reflecting on how researchers and professionals can challenge objectified understandings by challenging categorisation.

I have chosen to explore Maryam’s experience of the mentioned process because it makes visible how categorising people and practices is done in detail and over time, with many professionals involved. In other words, this experience is well suited for identifying traces of ruling relations. Maryam’s experience is, however, not unique. On the contrary, my interviews with other mothers with a refugee background contain many traces of the shaping power of the understandings used in the process Maryam tells of. For instance, also the experience of many others of my informants indicate that they are met as lacking knowledge and needing help.

Research informing this article

Institutional ethnographic research most often starts with exploring a certain kind of ‘work’ from a certain ‘standpoint’ (Smith, 2005). In the research I base this article on, I started out studying the ‘work’ of getting a job and a good life in Norway more generally from the standpoint of mothers with a refugee background. The aim of the research is to explore how generalised, objectified ways of understanding or organising human activity enter the women’s everyday lives, the effects this has and how such standardising processes can be challenged. To date, I have interviewed 25 women, some of them multiple times. Maryam is one of these. At the time of writing, I have interviewed her four times. Doing institutional ethnography, exploring people’s ‘work’ means exploring intentional activity that can be both physical, mental and emotional. Further, people’s work is understood and explored as always – implicitly or explicitly – ‘coordinated’ with the work of others. What we do, think and feel is always shaping and shaped by the work of others, even if we are not fully aware of how. In what Smith calls ‘local relations’, relations between people who interact directly with one another, talking is the prime coordinating tool. When people’s actions are to be coordinated across time and space, for instance in big ‘functional complexes’ like Norwegian welfare state institutions dealing with childhood/education, other coordinating tools are needed. Such coordination relies on discourses, but also on material texts. According to Smith, material texts do not determine people’s actions. Their replicability, however, gives them the capacity to standardise people’s actions across time and space. But such standardisation only happens if people ‘activate’ (Smith, 2005) the texts; read them and act on them.
Exploring how people engage in such standardising processes, the effects they have and the possibilities for resisting them is the aim of doing institutional ethnography. Identified ‘disjunctures’ (Smith, 2005) or gaps between people’s lived experiences and objectified understandings of these experiences are seen as signs of institutional power at play in people’s lives and are often used as starting points for research into the institutional relations people’s experiences are shaped in and by. In this article, I remain in Maryam’s standpoint. Still, my interviews with her, together with eight documents from teachers and other professionals ‘gathering information’ (innhenting av informasjon) about Maryam and her children on behalf of the CPS, provide knowledge about the institutional relations her experience is part of. According to Smith, frontline professionals use such texts to fit the actualities of people’s lives into institutional categories; ‘they transform the local and particular into the generalized forms in which they become recognizable and accountable across the local settings of institutional work’ (Smith, 2005: 186). In doing so, they establish ‘institutional agency’: the capacity to control and mobilise the ‘work’ of both Maryam and other professionals.

**Contextualising Maryam’s mothering**

In Norway, creating good childhoods has been closely linked to building a good nation (Gullestad, 1997), and Nicole Hennum (2015) claims that contemporary Norway is particularly child-centred. In Norway, as elsewhere, children who do not develop optimally are seen as vulnerable and at risk (Nilsen, 2017). Parents, on the other hand, are seen as responsible for reducing such risk and as detrimental for optimising children’s development by doing ‘intensive’ parenting, guided by expert knowledge (Hays, 1998; Murphy, 2003; Hollekim, 2016). An important part of parenting is facilitating schooling, and in the Nordic countries, pedagogues and other professionals probably shape childhoods and parenting practices to a particularly high degree. The Nordic welfare states have high ‘welfare ambitions’ (Vike, 2004) on behalf of their populations, and trust in the state is very high (Stenius, 1997). Also, an exceptionally large share of pre-school children enter daycare institutions at a young age (Dannesboe et al, 2018). As elsewhere, professionals in these institutions increasingly ‘invest in children’ by ‘assessing risk’ and ‘intervening early’ to produce ‘happy’ and ‘productive’ future citizens (Nilsen, 2017; Cabanas and Illouz, 2019). Despite being framed as neutral, childhood and parenting idea(l)s enforced by such professionals are both classed and raced (Griffith and Smith, 2005; Hollekim, 2016) and mothers are still held accountable to them more than fathers (Hays, 1996; Murphy, 2003; Ellingseter, 2005).

According to Marianne Gullestad (2002), a central part of Nordic egalitarianism is a perception of ‘equality as sameness’, indicating that the social pressure to conform to one set of norms may be especially high. Suvi Keskinen and co-authors (Keskinen et al, 2009) claim that unlike countries more directly involved in colonialism, the Nordic countries have not been forced to reflect critically on colonial ideologies, leaving them largely unacknowledged. Scandinavians’ downplaying of power differences (Gullestad, 2002) may also contribute to giving such ideologies low visibility. Nordic frontline professionals often exert a ‘soft’ power that is difficult to see – and therefore difficult to resist (Mik-Meyer, 2017). One important way of exerting such power is categorising ‘users’, and welfare state professionals’ categorising of immigrants is
often, among other things, shaped by dominant understandings of immigrants and immigrant groups (Olwig and Pærregaard, 2011). Karen Fog Olwig and Karsten Pærregaard (2011) claim that certain immigrants in the Nordic countries are framed as lacking important qualities and in need of ‘fixing themselves’ with the help of welfare state professionals.

In the Agder region, where Maryam lives, professionals may be particularly eager to get parents – and most of all mothers – to fix themselves. Women do considerably less paid work here than in other parts of Norway, and mothering ideals are probably particularly hard to live up to (Magnussen, 2015). Furthermore, a large part of the population, including young adults, lives on public benefits (Statistics Norway, 2022). As elsewhere (Van Lancker, 2012), politicians and professionals in the region often understand this situation to be the result of ‘social heritage’. Intervening to prevent this is probably seen as especially important for families with a refugee – and a Somali – background. Migrants have lower employment rates than non-migrants, and Somali women have the lowest employment rates in contemporary Norway (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2016). Furthermore, the success of children of refugees in the educational system and work life is often labelled ‘the litmus test of integration’ (Henriksen and Østby, 2007).

The letter from the CPS: Maryam’s story

When I meet Maryam for an interview some days after her text message, she says that her youngest children’s school has both ‘ordinary’ and ‘special’ classes. She says that professionals from PPT (educational and psychological counselling service) and the school approached her, questioning which class Faisal (one of her sons) should go to. They referred to a mental test showing that his mental age differed from that of his peers. Maryam already knew this, not least because he has a diagnosis. She tells me:

‘Faisal started in first grade and after some time we talked about him with PPT and the school. They asked me “He understands like a child of this and this age. He has some special needs.” We talked about what kind of class is suitable for him. They asked “You are the mother and decide about him. Are you willing to consider him changing class?” I said “Yes, I think another class will be better for him, one that is not big.” So in the end, the headteacher said that you can choose between two classes. A special class and the one he is in now. […] He said “You are the mother and you decide the class.” So, I visited the people working with the special class. I said “Ok”. Me and the headteacher and one other woman, we talked to the people working with the special class. A lot of information. In the end, they said “He can start in the special class in a month.” […] Then he started. It was just a few kids and then him. They are different too. Some of them I could not speak with, they were just running all the time. The others are like Faisal, but also different, I think. I was not happy, but I said “Maybe. We will see.”’

Maryam thinks that Faisal will probably do better in a class with fewer pupils, and later we will see that she wants the school to put more resources into his language and physical development. The quote above shows that already when Maryam meets her son’s new classmates for the first time, she is not happy and signals that she may not want Faisal
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to continue there. She is, however, willing to try. Maryam’s preoccupation with Faisal’s language development is why she worries when she is not able to speak with some of her son’s new classmates. However, a few months later when she gets in touch with Faisal’s contact teacher to say that he cannot continue in the new class she bases her argument on her son’s happiness: “I talked to the teacher and said that he could not continue in that class. He is different. I think he did better before. The kids he was with [in the old class] … he laughed a lot.” The contact teacher talks to the school’s headteacher, and after a month, there is a meeting with people from Faisal’s old and new classes:

‘We were many. They talked a lot. I said I did not want that class. The people from the special class say that I decide. “But maybe first we can find a better special class. You can decide.” And really, I believe that it is better with a better special class. They say that they need one month to find information, about Faisal, with language, with class and so on. I said “Ok, I can wait one month.” Then I waited for a month and we had a meeting. They changed the class. I think they think that I do not understand the system and so on. I went there and the contact teacher writes a lot of information with Faisal and PPT. She read those two papers and says that this class is suitable and that the others in the class have similar sicknesses. We agree. He will continue in that class. I think ten people say that they agree. In the end … PPT, everyone agrees that he should be in that group. In the end, they said “Mother can decide.” I think that it is maybe best to continue [in the special class]. Many people.’

Maryam is again told that she decides on Faisal’s class. She refers to the many people involved and the amount of oral and written information. She still thinks that having another special class is the best for her son, and all the professionals agree.

However, after agreeing that Faisal will go to another special class, Maryam asks to see this class and is shocked because the kids there seem to have even more severe problems than those in his previous class. She feels the professionals are trying to manipulate her into making what she fears is not the best solution for her son, which is why she says “I think they think that I do not understand the system.” Meeting the kids in the second special class, she immediately tells her son’s contact teacher that they have misunderstood each other:

‘I said to the teacher that we have misunderstood each other. I cannot even think that Faisal will go there. She says that it is suitable for him. She says PPT thinks it is better if he goes in this class. Then I said that “I do not think that is the best.”’ Then I went home and thought a lot. He needs to be lifted up, not pushed down. These kids being sick, they cannot go out. All the time, they are inside. All the kids are very different. I think that some of them are crying a lot.’

Maryam worries about Faisal’s classmates’ inability to be outside because she wants him to be more physically active. Faisal is in this class for another month. Then, Maryam calls his contact teacher and requests a meeting, and shortly after, there is a meeting involving the contact teacher, the school’s headteacher and people from PPT. The headteacher asks what Maryam thinks about the second special class:
‘I said that I was not pleased with that class. I want to take him back [to the first, ‘ordinary’ class]. He said that that is fine, it is my decision. […] We had a meeting some weeks after Faisal changed back. They asked how he is doing in school. I said that he started just some weeks ago. I said that he was a bit insecure at first because he moved back and that I hope he will do better, but that I cannot see any improvement now. The teachers agreed. Children always get a bit insecure when they come to a new place. They said that we would have a meeting two months later, and PPT is coming. I said that he needs special education [specialpedagog] because he has difficulties reading compared to others his age. The headteacher said yes. Then I became sick and things became chaotic. Then the school nurse came.’

Once more, Maryam is told that she decides on her son’s class. After this meeting, the school nurse calls and invites herself to Maryam’s house. Somehow knowing that Maryam was sick, she wants to evaluate her need for help. Maryam tells the school nurse that she has help with the kids and the house from her ex-husband and friends, but the school nurse still tells her that she can apply for help. After a week, another woman comes to Maryam’s house. Once again, Maryam mentions the help she gets from her social network. The woman, however, applies for assistance on Maryam’s behalf:

‘She [the school nurse] called and asked if she could come to my house. I said “That’s fine.” We talked a little bit and she asked about the children and about their father. I said that he can pick up and deliver the kids. I got help from some Somali women. I talked a little bit and she wrote. […] Then she says that I can apply for some help. I said “Ok.” After a week, another woman called me. “My name is this and this, I need you to talk for an interview.” “But who are you?” “I am in this and this office concerning families.” One day she came and brought a big piece of paper. Then she asks where the kids go. I tell about their schools. I got help from two Somali women for making food and cleaning the house and tidying. One lives with me and helps the kids to bed. And in the morning, sometimes she brings Faisal to school. The father also helps bringing and picking up. She says “How is it with food?” She asks if I want to order food. I said “No, I have help with that. Another friend is at home all day and fixes dinner for the kids. I do not need to order.” “Ok, but cleaning the house?” she asks. […] I said “Another friend cleans a lot. She comes every day at 8 and tidies the house and cleans, vacuums, makes dinner and leaves around 11.30.” I said that I did not need more help cleaning, that I have help. She said that the school had talked about Faisal being a bit special. “How is Faisal?” I said that “He is fine. I have help delivering and picking him up from school.” After interviewing me for a long time, she said that she can apply to have a person deliver him to school every day and follow him. I said “Ok.” After two weeks, I got a letter from her. She says that she has applied for a person. “The rule is that when you are divorced, but both live in the same municipality, you do not need help, but you can call a number that is listed here if you need something
extra.” I didn’t need anything. I did not call, since they [her friends and ex-husband] continued to help me.’

This quote shows that several professionals try to get help for Maryam, even though she has not asked for it and repeatedly and in detail tells them that she already has the help she needs. In the end, it turns out that Maryam is not even entitled to help, but can call a number if she ‘needs something extra’. She does not call. She is then asked to come to another meeting at school. Before this meeting, Faisal’s language skills have been assessed:

‘Four people come from the school: the contact teacher, the headteacher and two other persons. And PPT comes, physiotherapy and one from HABU [habilitation service for children and adolescents]. They were eight people. They had ordered a translator. First, they talked about Faisal having problems in school and that he is not the same age [as others his age]. I said “I know that he is not the same age.” They asked me if I needed to change [class]. I said “No, I don’t need to change now. I changed only three months ago. Why should I change?” I said “He can continue in this class until next year. If he is not better, then maybe. But not now.” Then the headteacher said ‘What do you think we need?’” Then I said “Someone from special education that knows Faisal. Pronunciation and letters.” Then he says that the school can plan and write information for the municipality.’

Once again, Maryam meets with many professionals. For the first time in the process, however, the school has arranged for a translator to join them. The professionals start out by explaining Faisal’s mental age, which Maryam already knows. Later in the interview, she tells me that the problem with Faisal is that his mental age is lower than kids in the ‘normal’ class and higher than kids in the ‘special’ class and that neither of them really suits him. However, she believes that he will be ‘lifted up’ the most by hearing and seeing others talking and running around, in combination with support from a professional with the right competence and the time to get to know him properly.

Some days after the meeting, Maryam gets a phone call from a municipality employee:

‘He had received a letter from the school. He said “We have help for poor kids during the holiday.” I said “I have planned for the kids in the holiday.” The school inspector also called. “You are sick and the kids’ father lives in another house.” I said that I had planned that their father will travel with them. He talked a lot. In the end, I said that I had planned this with their father and that they are going to [place]. He said “Ok, that’s good.” Then he started talking about Bashir [another of Maryam’s sons, in the same school]. The school nurse called me. “Bashir is a bit overweight now, is he attending football? He needs some activity since he is becoming older and he is overweight now. After the holiday, he can start football.” The inspector said that it’s good that Bashir will start football. He said that he is overweight and impatient. Writes and finishes [his school work] quickly. I said that I agree with his teacher that he needs more help. Then he asks if I have five kids alone. I said “Yes, but it is ok.” He said he can make an arrangement with the kids and ask what they need.’
Maryam had not signalled that she wanted help with arranging and financing her children’s holiday and does not want this help, but she agrees that Bashir needs more help with his schoolwork. The phone call from the school nurse shows how professionals not only monitor her children’s mental age but also their bodies. Without asking for Maryam’s opinion, the school nurse states that Bashir has a weight problem and that organised football training is the solution.

Some weeks after these phone calls, Maryam receives a letter from the CPS. The CPS has received a message from the school listing reasons why they are ‘worried’ and believe the CPS should evaluate the family. Maryam says:

‘The headteacher told me “You can decide, you can change if you do not like that class.” After, they write [to the CPS] saying that the mother does not want him to go there. She wants him to go to the old class. All teachers agree that he should go to the special class. But mother does not want it, she wants to go back to the old class. She does not want to cooperate with us. They wrote about Bashir. He is not the same as other kids his age, he is not doing so good at school. And she [Maryam] is alone. They said maybe the kids have problems with the home. That it is not good to grow up there. That is why they asked for an evaluation of the family and what is happening with the kids. “We have help for the kids. But we don’t know what happens inside the home’ […] “We are talking about five kids here,” the letter said. […] I have many questions in my head. I think it’s hard to understand. I am a foreigner, I am not that good at understanding everything. Maybe they think that I am a stupid mother and do not understand. I understand the system, but … I got confused and thought a lot about why they do these things. […] They write that the mother is sick and that they do not know what the Somali milieu helps with. “We arranged a summer holiday for the kids, but the mother didn’t want it.” They think that I am a foreigner and do not have family. So, he [the inspector] has written that “the mother supports her children, but she cannot manage five kids”. He also writes that the kids do not have any activities. That means that I cannot manage to send them to activities. […] They decide over us. We cannot decide anything. […] “When mother became sick she did not want help. We tried, but we did not succeed.” They always find something wrong with me.’

What angers Maryam the most is that she is categorised as uncooperative and a cause for concern when she does what the involved professionals initially tell her to do: decide on the class for Faisal. We also see that Maryam’s status as a single parent of five children and the lack of organised leisure activities for them are listed as causes for concern. The inspector writes that they do not know if Maryam gets any help from her social network and labels her friends ‘the Somali milieu’. Not least, Maryam mentions once more that the professionals may think of her as “stupid”. Our talk ends with Maryam telling of yet another talk with the school nurse, after the arrival of the letter from the CPS. It suggests that the struggle over Faisal’s class is not finished:

‘She called me again and said that Bashir has the right weight, but he is a bit short. I said that we [the family] are not tall. She took it negatively.
[...] This Tuesday, she called me again. She said that Huda [one of Maryam’s daughters] had put on a little weight. She asked if I was at home. She talked to me as if I was stupid and do not understand anything. But I weigh my kids and make sure they eat healthy food. Then she tells me that Faisal has no friends in his class. He does not like school. She asks me what I think is the best class, the special class or the ordinary class. I say “I think that he should continue in the ordinary class.” He is different. One day he is happy, the next day he does not want to go. This time, he was negative and said he had no friends in that class. She asks if I think he should change class. I said “No, because he just started.”

According to the school nurse, it turns out that Bashir did not have a weight problem after all, but that Huda might have one. Maryam says that she is now very unhappy with the school. She tells that the other “Somali and foreign families [with children in the school] are also in contact with the CPS. I don’t know what the problem is with that school.”

Meeting with Maryam some months later, she tells how people from the CPS came to her house twice to observe her and her children and concluded that she was a good, caring mother. They closed the case. Maryam, however, agreed to return Faisal to the special class shortly after the letter of concern to the CPS. The eldest children feared being removed from their home and one of them would cry when she put him to bed. Maryam says that she has other children to take care of besides Faisal and that she “cannot risk losing them over this”:

‘I said that maybe I misunderstood and that I agree with you, you are professionals and wise and good. So, you can decide over Faisal and I will cooperate. He [the school rector] said “very good”. The contact teacher and the leader at SFO [after school programme], a woman from PPT and the school nurse … I said “I agree with you.” Maybe they think that I do not understand anything. I am a foreigner, do not have experience, education … But I have good knowledge in my head. I think about how I can solve this and use my knowledge. […] Before, I thought about Norway as a place you can do what you want. Now, I think it is a bit like dictatorship.’

Not acknowledging Maryam as a knower

In the process Maryam told me about, she was several times told that she was the one to decide which class Faisal should be in. This signals that she is acknowledged as a knower. Throughout the process, however, Maryam gets the feeling that she is not considered a knower, and her story contains many signs that several professionals do not understand her as having important knowledge about Faisal and her other children. When she does not agree with the experts about which class Faisal should be in, for example, she does not seem to be acknowledged as acting on a different kind of knowledge than that of the involved professionals (like knowledge about Faisal’s happiness/sadness), but rather as acting on a lack of knowledge – and as ‘uncooperative’. According to Engebretsen and Fuglerud (2009), Norwegian welfare state professionals often say that decisions are in
the hands of their ‘users’, but intervene if they do not make the ‘right’ choice from the professionals’ point of view. They also claim that conflicts of interest between minority ethnic parents and Norwegian school employees are often not acknowledged as conflicting interests, but instead as a lack of knowledge on part of the parents.

Some of the texts written to ‘gather information’ for the CPS hint that ‘lacking understanding’ is a problem both for Maryam and some of her children. One teacher writes that it can be challenging to understand how much Huda understands, even if (s)he describes her school results as ‘average’. Faisal’s teacher writes that his parents have problems both speaking and understanding Norwegian. Bashir’s teacher, on the other hand, writes that ‘language/understanding can be challenging’, without specifying further, leaving the reader much room for interpretation. In her/his text, this teacher also insinuates that even if Bashir himself often says that he understands, he often does not understand. This is written after the passage about Bashir’s parents’ lack of understanding, and can direct the reader towards the conclusion that overestimating their own understanding of things is a general problem in Maryam’s family. That possible challenges concerning understanding can also be attributed to the teachers – for example how they view Maryam and her children, and how they talk to them – is effectively hidden.

Displacing Maryam’s knowledge with generalised, objectified knowledge

Maryam’s story shows many signs of professionals activating objectified understandings, based on knowledge that is seemingly devoid of people, context and history, and which is therefore also untouched by society’s power differences. This knowledge, of which much can be categorised as expert knowledge (Murphy, 2003), is materialised in and disseminated through material texts that organise the professionals’ work with Maryam. For instance, the school nurse activates the understanding that a good childhood involves organised leisure activities and that as a boy, Bashir would benefit from playing football. In her/his evaluation, Bashir’s teacher does not mention football, but states that Bashir has no organised leisure activity (even if he goes to the mosque every Saturday) and that he ‘has missed this’. The school nurse may be particularly eager to make sure that Maryam’s children take part in organised activities, seeing that contemporary public debate in Norway and Agder focuses on ‘including’ children from poor families (often with refugee backgrounds) by enrolling them in such activities. Maryam, however, knows that Bashir does not like football and that some of the ‘football boys’ in his class have hit him and repeatedly called him ‘chocolate man’. While Bashir’s teacher writes that Maryam and her ex-husband ‘have been worried’ that he has been ‘harassed’ (plagett) in school, Maryam tells me that she has reported specific instances of racist bullying to the teacher. She has also criticised the teacher for not addressing this properly. We see no traces of this knowledge in Maryam’s interaction with the professionals. Bashir’s dislike of football and the bullying – and the teacher’s potential lack of handling it – is kept in the shadows. Instead, the fact that Bashir does not attend football is reported as one of many signs signalling that Maryam is incapable of understanding her children’s needs and/or of meeting these.
When the professionals activate objectified – including expert – understandings instead of assisting in articulating and bringing Maryam’s knowledge into the process, they build a gap or disjuncture between Maryam’s experience and their understanding of her situation. Maryam’s experience with Bashir’s teacher, which she told me about in earlier interviews, makes visible another such gap. The letter to the CPS states that the school ‘has help for the children’, but does not know what ‘happens inside the home’, insinuating that Maryam is to blame for her children’s poor school results and other possible problems. We saw that Maryam agreed that Bashir needed more help with his schoolwork. She has repeatedly tried to get Bashir’s teacher to provide him with more help but ended up paying a Somali university student to help him. In the letter to the CPS, however, the school’s possible role in Bashir’s poor school results is left out. Instead, signs of school challenges among Maryam’s children are only described as possible signs of insufficient or even harmful mothering on Maryam’s behalf. In summing up her/his text to the CPS, Bashir’s teacher writes that ‘The school is worried about the parents’ capacity to follow up on five kids with very different, special needs.’

In the texts from the other teachers, however, little or no worrying about Maryam is visible. Each teacher exclusively writes about the child in her/his class. Bashir’s teacher, however, categorises all of Maryam’s children as having ‘special needs’, even though three of them are not in any way portrayed in this way by their teachers. Furthermore, all the other teachers write themselves into their texts, for example by writing ‘the way I consider it…’. They make the reader attentive to the fact that they produce knowledge from their standpoint. Bashir’s teacher has written one of the longest texts, but (s)he is the only one of the teachers who – in addition to writing that ‘the school is worried’ – does not write himself/herself into the text.

We also saw that several professionals with whom Maryam interacts seem to categorise her as a ‘single mother of (too?) many kids’. Children in families with many children have a greater risk of future societal ‘exclusion’ (Frønes, 2018), and Griffith and Smith (2005) show how the nuclear family is still, subtly, understood as ‘the ideal family’ in North America. Families headed by single mothers are understood as providing a risky environment for children to grow up in. In contemporary Sweden, both ‘single mothers’ and unemployed people are often used as contrasts to notions of the ideal citizen (Dahlstedt and Lozic, 2017). The fact that Maryam is a single mother without higher education or paid work may make her home seem like an even more risky environment for her children, even if she does her best. In the ‘gathering information’ texts to the CPS, Bashir’s teacher is the only one who gets across that Maryam is divorced. (S)He does this by writing that Bashir is sometimes sad and connects this to his parents’ divorce and that he has to help a lot with younger siblings. Furthermore, the school inspector seems to think that Maryam needs more economic and practical help as a divorcée than as a married woman. Her experience, however, is the complete opposite. In an earlier interview, Maryam told me how she, as a single parent, had more income and full control over the family economy. She does not at all consider herself poor, like the rector seems to do. Furthermore, her ex-husband still provides much of the help with the children that he provided when they were married. Yet again, we see how an objectified understanding displaces Maryam’s knowledge about her children and her life more generally.
Constructing Maryam as a suspicious mother

Maryam herself also believes that the school nurse and the inspector see her as needing help because they see her as ‘a foreigner with no family’. While the involved professionals do not know the details of her finances and may have reason to believe that she might need help financing her children’s holiday trip, we have seen that Maryam repeatedly, and in great detail, has explicated the help she gets from her ex-husband and friends. These resources, however, not only seem to be made invisible by the understandings of the involved professionals, but several seem to actively disregard them, and even make them look suspicious. In the letter to the CPS, the school inspector does not refer to Maryam’s social network as just that, but as ‘the Somali milieu’. In contemporary Norway, ‘ethnic milieus’ are often framed as suspicious (Engebrigtsen and Fuglerud, 2009), and the reference to ‘the Somali milieu’ is the most explicit sign that at least some professionals’ understanding of Maryam’s ‘Somaliness’ does something to the process under study. Further, Bashir’s teacher’s reference to his help with younger siblings signals that Maryam’s Somali background is connected to problematic parenting practices. In today’s Norway, this practice is often seen as a sign of parents exerting ‘negative social control’ vis-à-vis their children. Such control is, moreover, almost exclusively understood as exerted by immigrant parents from Africa and Asia – and particularly Muslims (Košuta, 2018). Maryam’s appearance leaves little doubt that she is a Muslim.

I argue, however, that first and foremost it is probably because Maryam has been constructed as lacking knowledge and needing help that she becomes suspicious in the eyes of the professionals. When she disagrees with what the professionals think is best for Faisal, she seems to be understood as a mother who does not understand her child’s best interest. When she declines the help of the inspector, however, she seems to be understood as a mother who has something to hide from the school and the welfare state. The inspector then writes that the school does not know what happens in the home. This signals that something harmful may be happening there, while simultaneously giving the impression that the school does know what happens in the homes of other pupils.

Challenging ruling relations through challenging categorisation

In the introduction to this article, I wrote that institutional ethnographic research aims to develop knowledge that can expand people’s agency in institutional relations. When I meet Maryam for an interview six months after she told me about the letter from the CPS, I tell her that I believe that the letter was to a large degree caused by some school employees understanding her as lacking knowledge, needing help and finding her suspicious when she declines it. I say that it seems like the involved professionals, instead of asking for her experience and reflections, mostly imposed their solutions to what they saw as her and her children’s problems. Then, Maryam and I have this dialogue:

Maryam: I agree with that. If they ask, I can talk myself.
Author: Has someone you have met been more like… ‘What do you think?’
Maryam: No. All the time in meetings they give me information. All the time, they start with saying that I have five kids and a very heavy job. They always
Becoming a bad mother

talk to me that way. ‘Faisal is special’. ‘You have a big burden’. ‘You have very heavy shoulders.’

Author: Has there never been one single person who has been more open and asked ‘What do you think, do you need any help?’

Maryam: No, I don’t remember a single time. [...] If they want my kids to be ok, why don’t they talk with me first? They can ask if I need help to pay for football training. That’s better than lots of suspicion.

Maryam also believes that I, as an academic, would have a better chance of making my knowledge count in meetings with professionals. I agree with her, and ask what she will do if she gets into another similar situation with the school; whether she will try to address these issues and/or consider bringing me or someone else to assist her in trying to have her knowledge and opinions acknowledged. Right away, she answers that she will move abroad if something similar happens again. The risk of losing her children makes my suggested resistance unthinkable to her, something that made me very aware of my responsibility in challenging the social forces that contribute to disqualifying her as a knower.

Using tools and insights from institutional ethnography to explore ‘soft’ or subtle ruling, as I do in this article, is one way of challenging such forces. Many researchers claim that the child-rearing practices of minority ethnic parents are being held up against seemingly neutral standards, thereby directing attention towards what looks like the faults and mistakes of individuals rather than towards their social circumstances (see, for instance, Vincent, 2017). However, the experience explored in this article shows that such a turn in attention is not enough. If we understand people’s circumstances in an objectifying way, by activating categorical knowledge (de Montigny, 2011) – for instance in the shape of ready-made understandings of what it means to be a single, unemployed Somali mother – we may still act as tools for ruling such women. In doing this, both well-intentioned professionals in the so-called woman-friendly Norwegian welfare state or researchers who label themselves feminist may end up making the lives of women like Maryam harder.

Notes
1 The research started in 2016 and is still ongoing, is financed by the University of Agder and is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.
2 The interviews were conducted in Norwegian. I interviewed some mothers over time because ruling relations (Smith, 2005) operate across both space and time. Interviewing over time, therefore, enables me to make such relations visible.
3 I have altered some minor details to keep Maryam anonymous. We have also gone through the information in the article together.
4 Aiming to unfold ‘work’, the researcher must take care not to adopt concepts from discourses and assist her informants in ‘unpacking’ concepts that they use. According to Smith (2005), such concepts often subsume what actually goes on.
5 A functional complex is a ‘work area’ in which several institutions are involved, as with higher education, for instance (Smith, 2005).
6 The authors knew that Maryam could get access to these texts, something that has most probably shaped them.
7 As at 1 January 2022, around 28,000 immigrants from Somalia lived in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2022). In total, Norway has a population of around 5.5 million.
The teacher who has primary responsibility for her son.

As we saw, the school rector once asked for Maryam’s opinion.

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Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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