Article

Motherhood in Context—Life Course Interviews with Young Mothers in Contact with Child Welfare

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Abstract: Background: The purpose of this article is to explore how a sample of young mothers in contact with child welfare services in Norway narrate their transition to motherhood and their relation with child welfare services. **Methods:** The article is based on life-course interviews with the mothers, on which we have conducted a content analysis inspired by narrative theory. **Results:** Results show that whereas the mothers deviated from common expectations of predictability and orderliness before they became mothers, they strived to provide a "good enough" situation for their children in line with expectations in larger society ever after. Nevertheless, the complex disadvantages that the mothers said they had in several life domains concerning social networks and family support, education, working life, housing, and that were apparently already in their transition to adulthood, were likely to increase even after the mothers had decided to enter the mothering role in socially acceptable ways. **Conclusions:** The article concludes that child welfare services may contribute positively by acknowledging the complexity of young mothers' living context when assessing mothering practices.

Keywords: child welfare; historical context; life context; mothering practice; transition to adulthood; young mothers

1. Introduction

This article is on how young mothers with psychosocially demanding background and who were in contact with child welfare services narrated their transition to adulthood and motherhood and their interaction with child welfare services.

Having grown up in families with challenges related to poverty and social problems, sometimes also resulting in a subsequent contact with the child welfare system and a history of out-of-home placement, may be associated with further challenges both in the transition to adulthood and later in life. The risk is high of marginalization in many important areas of life, like mental health, employment, and education (DeVito 2010; Green 2006; Mollborn 2017; Osgood et al. 2010; Vinnerljung et al. 2007; Weed et al. 2015).

In addition to the particular risk of school failure, the rate of teenage childbirths seems to be higher for young women who at some level have been involved in the child welfare system compared to peers with similar socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds (Brännström et al. 2015; Brännström et al. 2016; Vinnerljung et al. 2007).

Early motherhood per se has also been conceptualized as a social problem (Duncan 2004). Research on early motherhood shows relatively unequivocally that this status represents a heightened risk of remaining at a lower level of education, looser or missing attachment to the labor market, more health problems, lower income and greater dependence on public support (e.g., Angelini and Mierau 2018; Oxford et al. 2010; Vinnerljung et al. 2007).

Children of young mothers are also at risk. They tend to have more social and emotional problems as well as more problems related to health, behavior, and education than children of older parents (e.g., Morinis et al. 2013; Rafferty et al. 2011).

Thus, although becoming parents at an early stage in life may represent a new and positive opportunity in many ways, even for young people who do not have the best starting points (Duncan 2007), the risk of deteriorated wellbeing and of remaining in a disadvantaged position is high. Yet if those young parents, and especially the mothers, are in marginalized positions and have children who exhibit problems in some way or other, their capacity to understand and handle the needs of their children may be questioned (Borkowski et al. 2007; Breheny and Stephens 2010; Weed et al. 2015).

Research on the complexities and nuances of the lived experience of parents in contact with child welfare is in demand. Often, structural issues and the parents' own resources and perspectives on their parenting are not taken into consideration (Macvarish 2010; Bunting et al. 2015; Fauske et al. 2018; Dunkerley 2017). There seems to be a particular need for more knowledge about those nuances and complexities that tend to maintain and reproduce disadvantage, and that affect whole families, and not merely the young father or mother

Also, eliciting and discussing the complexity and nuances in the life situation of young mothers requires a deeper understanding of the historical time that frames the storytelling. In any historical period, expectations related to parenthood shape a fine-meshed network of formal and informal rules and social practices (Fauske 1996). Contemporary expectations towards parenthood seem to be closely related to the much-debated construct on the transition to adulthood called "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2004, 2007). This construct builds on the assumption that the transition to adulthood has become both postponed and protracted and that entrance into higher education, employment, marriage, childbirth, and independent living occurs in sequential and predictable order over a long period of time. For many young people today, according to Arnett (2007), the transition to adulthood thus represents a potential for developing one's self-esteem, enjoy one's freedom and to realize self before entering adult positions and the obligations implied in becoming a parent.

A prevailing expectation related to the view on adulthood as "emerging" is orderliness and "correct timing" (Holgate 2012; Schwiter 2011). This may be the longstanding consequence of the economic instability in the wake of World War II, in which the younger generation made efforts to secure social, economic, and cultural capital before settling down (Fauske 1996). In line with this conclusion, postponed childbirths have continued as the general trend since the 1960–1970s in Western countries, including Norway (Part et al. 2013; Sedgh et al. 2015). The birth-rate for teenagers in Norway has been declining to under one percent in 2019 (Statistics Norway 2019). Getting accidentally pregnant may add to the burden of young people if they also have challenges in other relevant life domains.

The construct of "emergent adulthood" has been criticized for its status as a universally valid description of the transition to adulthood (Blatterer 2007), a critique that points to the construct's imperfect adjustment to certain changes in those cultural and social conditions that constitute a transition to adulthood in recent time, at least in Western countries (Settersten et al. 2005; Blatterer 2007; Furlong et al. 2011). There are structural and social differences related to such as class, gender, and disability and that set limits for how individuals can plan and produce their own transition processes and their adult selves (Dawson 2012). The transition process and the transition experiences may thus differ significantly between groups of "emerging adults" (Berzin 2010; Berzin and De Marco 2009; SmithBattle and Leonard 2012; DeVito 2010; Mollborn 2017; Weed et al. 2015).

The need for child welfare and other services to focus on the narratives of young mothers' transition to adulthood, therefore, seems crucial. The Norwegian child welfare represents a family-oriented welfare system emphasizing early intervention and prevention with the use of non-intrusive methods and collaboration with parents and children (Child Welfare Act, 1992). These underlying ideas and principles, which also accommodate parents' contexts, refer to a child welfare system often described

as needs-oriented in contrast to risk-oriented, implying a primary orientation to family preservation and the use of assistant measures (Khoo 2004; Gilbert et al. 2011).

In order to capture a broad picture of the participants' life current life contexts and challenges and to shape a ground for improved child welfare practice, the article focuses both on the situation before the participants' became pregnant and the period after they had taken the decision to keep the child and had entered the role as mothers for the first time. The article also focuses constraints and possibilities for the agency under those broader structural and discursive circumstances that seem to frame their motherhood.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. On the Study

The sample is derived from a larger group of 715 families who participated in a survey about families with children in contact with child welfare services (Clifford et al. 2015). Psychosocial and socioeconomic variables, variables indicating levels of marginalization, and demographic factors like gender, age, ethnicity were identified (Clifford et al. 2015). The final study report (Clifford et al. 2015) concluded that the situation for many study participants was verging on poverty. To identify psychosocial variables more specifically, the researchers also employed the CAF[1] standardized instrument, which aimed to map the families' global psychosocial strain in several life domains. From the larger survey sample, a smaller sample was drawn in which only the families who met the CAF criteria for moderate to severe psychosocial strain were included. Additional criteria were that the families had been in contact with child welfare services for more than two years and that the child who caused the contact with the services had functional reductions. The smaller sample largely reflected the same distribution of sociodemographic characteristics as in the survey sample. A total of 70 life course interviews were included in the study (Clifford et al. 2015). The interviewees were recruited by the child welfare service, on criteria set by the researchers. Those parents who gave their informed consent to participate were contacted by the researchers. The interviews were conducted as life-course interviews in the mothers' homes or in other places that they might prefer. The interviewers were instructed to ask open questions and to steer the life story narration as little as possible. The study was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD).

2.2. Our Sample

From the 70 life course interviews that were carried out among parents with moderate or high scores on the CAF scale, we selected those with parents who had had their first child when they were under the age of 30. Seven interviews fulfilled this criterium. All informants in our sample had their first child before they were 24 years old, and four were 18 years old at the time of delivery. All were ethnic Norwegians. All except one narrated their childhood years as psychosocially particularly demanding in terms of parental alcohol problems, parental neglect, parentification, bullying from peers or lack of same-age friends. Such a strain was the main reason for three of them being taken into custody in foster homes. Four of the mothers continued to live with their families of origin until their transition to adulthood, despite significant family problems

At the time of the interview, all the mothers had more than one child. One lived alone, one lived together with her child, two lived with their husbands in a family established after having their first child, and three mothers lived in extended families where the children had different fathers. One mother had a child in foster care. To ensure anonymity, we gave the participants fictive names and changed the age of the children.

1　CAF—www.everychildmatters.gov.uk Department for Education and Skills, 2006.

2.3. Narrative Analysis

In our exploration of young mothers' experiences and practices, we applied a narrative framework, implying attention to how the mothers make accounts of their lives in a storied form (Gergen 2004; Riessman 2008). The term narrative refers to an array of approaches that reflect different theoretical and methodological orientations (Riessman 2008). In general, the approaches give attention to how people make meaning of their past and present lives, often presented within a temporal ordering of events and actions (Riessman 2008). Storying one's life or aspect of one's life in the context of interviews may also include aspects of more unstructured telling of episodes or small stories (Riessman 2008; Polkinghorne 1988). As one's self and stories told about life experiences change in accordance with time, space, place, and audience (Gergen 2004; Polkinghorne 1988; Riessman 2008), narratives may be understood as situated stories "*at the intersection of several stories not yet completed*" (Polkinghorne 1988, p. 11). In storying life experiences, people get woven into reflections on what stories to tell and how to tell them, implying that the stories told are to understand as transformed, negotiated, and meaning determined experiences (Polkinghorne 1988; Riessman 2008). Storying one's life represents as such an active producing process of life- and self-presentations (Gergen 2004), influenced by the context of dominant discourses and societal contexts including culturally relevant perspectives, understandings and attitudes (Gergen 2004; Riessman 2008).

Our analysis of the stories told by the mothers is primarily inspired by the thematic analysis described by Riessman (2008), where attention traditionally is given to the content of the informants' accounts. The thematic approach may take a too narrow path as limited to the content of what is told. When related to openness for combining approaches and finding our own research "voice" (Riessman 2008), our analysis may be seen as inspired by features from her other described narrative approaches too.

The analysis aimed to capture how the individual experiences of young mothers in contact with child welfare were connected to the contextual levels and themes that emerged throughout their stories and how these experiences seemed to influence their everyday lives of mothering. The analysis process started by the authors reading each interview with a search for what the interview could reveal about each mother's life as a youth in transition to adulthood and as a young mother. In the following discussion of each story, the authors also searched for common themes across the individual stories. In the process of reflecting back and forth on different themes occurring in accounts about the mothers' past and present, as well as their future lives, the authors also found it important to include attention to how mothers presented small and larger events in their lives. Through this process, three common life themes were identified and temporarily defined as the mothers' "teenage selves", "motherhood selves," and "parenting context". In the further analysis, the authors included a search for how these life themes were structured around events, actions, and relations (Riessman 2008). In this part of the analysis, we also paid special attention to how the mothers seem to present themselves and others as part of the described events, actions, and relationships. More specifically, two pervasive positions seemed to drive forward the mothers' narrations about their teenage lives and lives as mothers, namely "fighting" and "striving". Identifying these self-positioning dimensions in the mothers' storied life, their narratives emerged with meaning and coherence in a way that gave fighting and striving the position as main plots of their narratives. In the final step of the analysis, the connection between the three life themes and fighting and striving as key self-positioning was evaluated and found to make visible the dominant pattern of the mothers' narratives. The final naming of the three life themes is "The transition to adulthood", "Mothering and the relation with child welfare", and "Striving for everyday living—the extended motherhood responsibility".

3. Results

In this section, we present the three main themes that emerged through the analysis of the stories told by the mothers in the life course interviews, whom we name Molly, Mary, Jane, Jill, Juliet, Mina, and Megan.

The first section is on the mothers' path to adulthood, including pregnancy and young motherhood. The second section is on their parenting responsibilities and their interaction with child welfare, including the support they got from them as mothers. In this section, we also make their individual stories visible to a greater extent than in the other sections because their experiences at this point tended to differ significantly from each other. In the third section, we convey how they narrated their actual life and family situation with less regard to each mother's specific story.

3.1. The Transition to Adulthood

When the young mothers in our sample talked about their youth, especially their years in upper secondary education, all but two of them characterized this period as turbulent. Turbulence could, for some of the mothers, involve rebellion against something: *"I was a rebel in my teens (…) I ended up in a bad environment and stuff and moved out from home when I was 18"*. Most of the participants had to leave their parental home or foster home at 16 to stay close to their secondary schools. This implied a new life situation for which they had the major responsibility regarding daily routines and schoolwork, something they talked about as both positive and challenging. No caregivers were daily around them for guidance and support, contrary to the assumptions of the protracted child–parent relationship, which underpins the construct of "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2004, etc.). The three of them who were in foster care during their teens though presented their foster parents as someone to turn to in hard times.

All but one of the seven mothers told stories about how their schoolwork was overshadowed by partying and how school tended to lose their attention:

"We would get an idea around eight o'clock in the evening of having a drink (…) we partied very often, mostly at his (boyfriend's) place, or here and there at our friends' places. I was never at home".

While excessive use of alcohol belonged to the party life, just a few of them talked about involvement in drug use:

"There was not much drugs. Well … we knew people who used it and that, and I tried it twice myself, but that is something that I never will do again, anyway. It was not for me (…). Although I was with a guy who used dope, I did not use it".

Nevertheless, their partying had consequences for their school grades. Some dropped out of school, such as one participant who began working instead: *"When I quit school … instead of doing nothing, I got a placement at a shop … and there I worked (….)* (But) *I did not pursue any further education"*.

One mother saw her devaluing schoolwork in favor of partying as a direct consequence of the feedback she received at school: *"I usually got only bad marks and that, and then you don't bother anymore"*.

A central theme in the mothers' narration of their teenage years is how they legitimized excessive partying and teenage pregnancy by emphasizing how they searched for an acknowledged social position that made it possible to leave family troubles and childhood bullying behind them:

"The fact that nobody could stand me made me end up in a wrong environment". This contact with what they defined as *'bad environments'* was, according to the mothers, often established through boyfriends who had considerable problems with drinking, drug use, and law and order. Examples of what young girls in a *'bad environment'* could experience were rape or abuse by their boyfriends.

Despite the disadvantages of an unsound environment, their new peer group, in contrast to their bullying peers in their past, provided them with a new and positive social identity:

"I sneaked into bars with an 18-year-old age limit when I was 16; I went to bars with a 20-year-old age requirement when I was 18. (…) When you spend a lot of time at a bar, restaurant, or dance hall, you are likely to get a VIP card. That is, you get benefits. You don't have to queue up, you don't have to pay, you avoid all the controls, and you can move freely around, actually wherever you want. (…) They did not know who I was; I just was another Norwegian blondie (…)."

In retrospect, however, this mother devalues the effect of the new identity and the relative freedom she had tried to acquire in her teenage years: "I tr*ied to be myself . . . however, that was not 'me'".*

This everyday life suddenly turned upside down after realizing that they were pregnant. Most stories about pregnancy seem to imply a turning point in the processual sense described by Rutter (1996). The mothers got growing responsibility for the coming child, implying that they stopped drinking and partying. Megan accounted for a change by emphasizing that *"the drinking and everything like that came to a stop".* Jill, who lived with her boyfriend when pregnant when she was 17 years, explained how she stopped drinking and smoking and *"tried to live a more normal life".* This appears to correspond with other studies showing that young parenthood can foster a new responsibility (Barn and Mantovani 2007; Connolly et al. 2012). Yet the mothers did not speak of pregnancy as a "choice", but rather as an unexpected result of their partying habits and search for recognition. Abortion was not a real option to them, although one mother says she considered abortion for a while.

Both the school situation, if still attending school, and the young women's general life situations worsened for most of the women when they became pregnant. With the exception of one, who did not know she was pregnant until the birth was underway, all the others said that they were only modestly prepared for the delivery and lacked understanding of what it meant to take care of a new-born child. Interesting for this section, however, is that the three mothers who had been in custody by child welfare when they got their first child all spoke highly about the help with their child that they had received from their foster parents. In all cases, the foster parents had cared for the mothers who had aged out of care. They depict their foster parents as valuable role models who partially relieved them of their load and let them act, at least occasionally, like any other youth even after the delivery.

Overall, looking at one's teenage years as a kind of separate reality is a common tendency in our material, underscored by comments such as, *"It is something I call the past",* and *"It is something I left behind".* This distinction between then and now seems to function as a contextual frame for their stories about pregnancy and motherhood.

3.2. Mothering and the Relation with Child Welfare

Drawing on the seven interviews, this section provides insight into how the mothers narrated their mothering practices, that is, the choices, activities and doings they tried to manage as part of the never-ending responsibility for the caring and upbringing of children. The section also provides insight into how their collaboration with the child welfare turned out to be for those mothers who asked for support after having been parenting for some time. In accordance with studies showing that reality can be tough and sometimes overwhelmingly demanding when having a child at a young age (Maxwell et al. 2011), the mothers included in this study viewed their new situation as challenging. They mostly had to manage the parenting by themselves, independent of whether they lived with the father of the child nor not. None of the mothers, according to their stories, had in practice a family network to lean on, and only three of them had caring foster parents up their sleeves around the time of delivery. They do not explicitly mention the father's responsibility for parenting and thus seem to take for granted that responsibility rested on themselves.

Although in need of various kinds of support, all but two of the mothers left the impression that they did not hesitate to enter motherhood. Their stories of becoming young first-time mothers show that they took responsibility for the situation, yet in different ways.

As first-time mothers, some of the participants turned to child welfare for help immediately after the child was born, whereas others encountered child welfare for other reasons and at later points in time. All the mothers experienced the initial support they received from child welfare as helpful, except from one who after the delivery had had her application for a stay in a maternal home refused by the child welfare.

However, a shared experience among most mothers was a marked shift in their contact with child welfare: from collaboration and support to serious questioning of their mothering capacities.

The mothers' stories on this contact show different paths and different ways of handling the situation. Some displayed adaptation by narrating motherhood practices in accordance with the demands from child welfare, while others opposed those demands by expressing their own views on "good enough" motherhood.

Molly is a mother who was almost stunned by child welfare questioning her mothering skills, after previously having a long unproblematic relationship and receiving good support: *"I made a lot of contact myself, I called them if I was unsure and asked for meetings."* She underlines her great trust in the relationship with child welfare at the beginning and her later feelings of being betrayed. This was displayed through an unexpected meeting alone with a social worker who introduced a planned care order. Overwhelmed by the situation, she initially accepted the proposal. However, once she recovered from the shock, she changed her view: *"I got a little better (…) and found out that this was going to be completely wrong (…) and then I got a lawyer".* The planned care order was then dropped, but in Molly's eyes, child welfare's concern for the child and her caregiving abilities has continued through different forms of surveillance, such as asking others about her situation instead of asking her. She thinks that *"they do not believe in me … I feel somewhat mistrusted".* She is especially concerned about the demand to bring her child to daycare at a specific time due to her challenges with organizing morning activities. Consequently, child welfare's concern for the childrearing situation gradually became a threat to her mothering position: *"It seems as if they just wait until I cannot cope any more".* Molly's story demonstrates communication with authorities characterized by strong demands for rule-following behavior (Wells 2011), leading her to experience the critical messages as unfair (Lieggohio and Caragata 2015). This situation seems to produce a shift in her sense of self. Instead of striving further for a valued mothering position, Molly has adopted a more passive and undecided self, dominated by the fear of losing custody.

Mary was among the mothers who contacted child welfare just after birth, as she had to deal with the caregiving of her unplanned and prematurely born child alone. She first received good and relevant support to help her manage the new life situation. However, the quality of their relationship has changed, partially related to the fact that child welfare gradually started to question her mothering competence. Mary narrated her current relationship with child welfare as characterized by a major focus on the "*problematic interaction*" between her and her firstborn child. She knows that her chronic pain disease and psychosocial problems lead to exhaustion, with little tolerance for noise some days. However, when talking about the interaction between her and the child, she primarily refers to how the social workers have defined a problematic shifting relationship between good and bad in accordance with changes in the health situation. By emphasizing that this assessment is related to the view of the social workers, the mother seems to distance herself from an experience of being perceived as responsible for the relational difficulties with her child. She knows that child welfare is still concerned about the child–mother relationship and finds this situation frustrating: "*Whatever I do, nothing is right to them".* As she sees it, her investment in her child's wellbeing has been disapproved of by child welfare, and instead of being held responsible for the problems. Mary's story demonstrates how mothers and children tend to be viewed by the child welfare service in a mother-blaming perspective (e.g., Gillingham and Bromfield 2008; Jackson and Mannix 2004).

Jane is a mother who narrated her experiences related to losing custody of her child. Her story gives attention to how shaken she became when her mothering practices were questioned shortly after birth, and how a nonconsensual placement for the child in a foster home was carried out: "*I was in the middle of postpartum depression, so it was mentally very difficult, and so was fighting in court two times without getting anywhere".* She experienced having no support from the child's father and is critical to the lack of measures from child welfare in advance of the placement. She pointed to her own frustration with child welfare at that time: *"I asked for a maternal home, and I did not get it … it was a flat refusal, so I did not feel that they tried".* At the time of the interview, she said that she had accepted the situation and her position as merely a visiting mother. However, she underlined that spending time with her child is of great importance for their ongoing relationship and for maintaining a good mother–child

relationship in the future: " ... *when I get in the door and I get a hug, he knows who I am, and that's because I've been there".* On the one hand, Jane's fight for her child throughout two trials represents a story about trying to restore the "taken-for-granted position" of the culturally dominant mother–child relationship (Snowdon and Kotzé 2012, p. 145). On the other hand, she also expresses how acceptance of the situation of "mothering at a distance" represents a performance of moral choice by realizing her child's best interests in accordance with the discourses of good motherhood (Smart and Neale 1999).

Jill also stated that child welfare began questioning her parenting practices and the child's situation a few months after birth. At the time, she was living with the father of the child, who was known to be violent. Despite living in this difficult life situation, having to do all the upbringing and feeling "*pretty sad*", she believed her caregiving practices were good enough. However, after being reported to child welfare and engaging in subsequent meetings, the child's situation was considered seriously worrisome. Child welfare found that the child needed to be placed in a foster home if Jill did not leave her boyfriend. Jill said she was deeply sorry to be left with this ultimatum. Leaving her boyfriend was not an option for her at the time, so she gave up the child for temporary placement with the goal of getting him back if the situation improved. To try to forget what she described as a painful loss, she returned to drinking and partying, though with unease. Although she still felt dependent on her boyfriend, her sadness and fear of permanently losing custody made her decide to change: "*I had to pull myself together".* In line with her stated ambition to reenter the mother role, she quit drinking and started to search for a job. After she found a job and a place to live, Jill regained custody of her child. This implied that child welfare acknowledged her for adapting to their ideology on what it means to be a good mother (Herland and Helgeland 2014). Nevertheless, she tends to vacillate between the position that mothering is somewhat burdensome and the position that it is something she has deliberately chosen, demonstrated by comments like, "*Perhaps it sounds a bit easier than it is ... it has gone quite well",* and "*It takes quite a lot to be a lone mother".* The comments may, however, also show the performance of a strong and powerful young mothering self (Baker 2009).

Juliet's story about her mothering practice showed a gradual entrance into full responsibility. She got pregnant while staying at a foster home and continued to stay there with her child for about one year. She talked about how she, in many ways, withdrew from the mothering role, as her foster parents took responsibility: "*They were more like parents than I was".* Juliet gives meaning to this situation by reflecting on the impact of her age at that time: "*I was perhaps a little too young".* Later, she was encouraged to take more active care of the child herself. In accordance with studies showing how being in foster care can be acknowledged as important when becoming a young mother (e.g., Aparicio et al. 2015), Juliet ascribed meaning to her mothering identity process by pointing to how this provisional semi-dependency on her foster parents helped her learn responsible mothering: "*I learned how to actually behave towards others .... not just doing ego trips".* She had left the foster home several years before and was married, and had five children at the time of inquiry. She expressed that responsible mothering can be tiring, although required. In her ongoing contact with child welfare due to concern about her oldest child, Juliet still believed that she was not acknowledged as a responsible mother by the social workers. She experienced that her mothering practices were questioned and that this questioning was reinforced through the social worker's routine visits to check on the child. Juliet said she saw the child welfare's concern as part of institutional incompetence and as mistrust in her as a former foster child.

Unlike these five mothers who, according to their stories, had a relationship with child welfare that gradually became more strained as their mothering practices were questioned, the two other mothers experienced a more positive contact with child welfare. While experiencing that the child welfare supported both the parents and their children, they had hesitated to make contact in the beginning.

Mina is one of these mothers. At the time of the inquiry, she experienced her caregiving situation as stressful. First, she had to manage everyday life with two children who needed a lot of follow-up work from both their parents and the kindergarten. Second, she had to navigate between her own part-time work and economic difficulties while her husband was often away working. Mina thought that the kindergarten did too little for her children in terms of facilitation and follow-up work, "*so

I contacted child welfare". She asked them to accompany her in meetings with the kindergarten and experienced that this collaboration with child welfare provided a better situation for the children. For her, child welfare was a place to inquire when in need of support and guidance. Mina underlined that she and her husband were eager to search for help, implying family counseling.

Megan, a mother of five, also experienced a stressful parenting situation. She developed a special concern for her oldest child early on and had been in contact with several professionals in the health system without receiving any help. She was always told to wait*: "They responded far too late, if they had done things a little earlier then maybe some of the problems would have been easier, for us and for the child"*. To deal with this demanding caregiving situation, the parents were advised to contact child welfare. The mother was in doubt, based on her contact with child welfare services as a youth, but she had an opportunity to engage in other child welfare services more recently: *"We have agreed on everything with child welfare"*. She added, *"If I'm unsure of anything, I can call them"*. The family has got various support in the form of parenting courses, counseling, relief measures and economic support. She made it clear that child welfare saw them struggling and that the measures they received created a better life for the whole family.

Both mothers see their relationship with child welfare as a voluntary contract that can be ended whenever they want. Megan formulated this by referring to how they initiated the contact: *"We asked for help ourselves and everything like that . . . and we can end it ourselves if we want . . . so we sort of decide the whole scheme ourselves"*. Therefore, both Mina and Megan position their mothering practices as "good enough", as seen from the child welfare's point of view.

The two mothers who experienced a collaborative relationship with the child welfare pay much attention to how they initiated different forms of help to manage a difficult family situation and may as such perform in accordance with responsible mothering (Hays 1996).

Generally, the position of parents is more ambiguous when collaborating with child welfare, as they may be defined as part of the child's difficulties. The parents are then both acknowledged as important collaboration partners and at risk of being devalued as partners too when child welfare assess their parenting (Midjo 2017).

3.3. Striving for Everyday Living—The Extended Motherhood Responsibility

The mothers' narratives included much attention towards the families' actual life situation by showing how their responsibility as young mothers implied many activities and doings far beyond mere childcaring practice. This section brings in the mothers' stories about their worries of the situation, their experiences of barriers to a changed situation and engagement in trying to reduce the damaging effect of low education, health problems, weak connection to the labor market and financial problems with consequences for their housing situation.

Five of the seven mothers did not finish upper secondary education, and all seven spoke about their working life as characterized by little stability. Low education level and reduced work capacity due to childcaring or health problems were experienced as barriers for their help with improving the financial situation of their families. Most mothers revealed an intention to finish their education or attain further education to improve their job chances. Yet, they experienced their parental responsibilities as hindrances for fulfilling their ambitions. Julia, for instance, saw her own part-time work and especially her partner's work as an important reason to wait with her own education plans. " . . . *he works away from home to make more money . . . trying not to get even more debt"*.

The mothers' stories about barriers for fulfilling their own life plans related to education and a working life included experiences of bodily pain and psychosocial strain in accordance with the above-referred CAF measure. An example is Mary, who has a serious disease and *"a little depression"* that makes some days hard to manage. Megan is also struggling with her working life due to her

problems with anxiety and depression. This situation is narrated as the reason for her hope to regain disability pension, as *"then I know I will have money every month . . . . and do not have to think about that."*[2]

Most families involved in this study have what the mothers narrated as economic hardships, which cause concern in their everyday lives. Three mothers have a disability pension due to serious health problems. The other four mothers have part-time work but have also been out of work in some periods due to parental responsibility, their own health problems, or challenges in getting a job. Mina, who had to stop working because of her children's problems, said: *"I just had to stay at home, we lost a lot of money, and it was like a vicious circle . . . yes, that was a difficult time."* Four mothers live with a partner, three of whom have a stable job. However, only one of the mothers described the family economy as good, while the other three referred to serious financial problems due to high debts incurred from buying a house. Megan is one of them:

"We bought a house there . . . but we had problems with the money and everything . . . so we had to sell . . . . we manage everything ourselves . . . a voluntary sale . . . . now we rent a house, but we must soon move to another place".

Another mother, who has a wide range of economic concerns, said, *"I think . . . we are bankrupt . . . we now have to try to get help from a private loan company."*

The mothers' stories also disclosed financial stress related to daycare expenses and other child-related expenses.

A central theme related to the economic hardships the mothers spoke about is their housing situation. Megan's story shows how the family had to sell the house they had bought for monetary reasons and all but one of the mothers experienced the difficulties related to renting a house, which often implicates short term contracts, frequent shifts of accommodation, and having to move from home to home with children.

Few mothers can draw on support from their families of origin, yet most of their partners have family that the mothers refer to as important helpers related to both debts and housing problems. Most mothers received benefits from child welfare to cover the cost of daycare and leisure activities. Some also received financial support from the social welfare system when they could not pay for all running expenses. However, not everyone received the help they applied for, resulting in their viewing the assessment of their financial situation as unfair. This is the case for Mina, who was denied the financial support her family needed: *"They said I could not receive more because I earned too much"*.

However, all financial support is of a temporary kind, implying that the families who experience longstanding economic problems will get reduced opportunities to make life choices (Dawson 2012, p. 313). A life with those economic challenges and needs for financial assistance that the mothers refer to seem, in line with Andelic et al. (2019), to be experienced as stigmatizing, including issues related to moral accountability.

The seven mothers' narratives on the complex life situation for the family show a striving and stressful everyday life with problems at different levels. Poverty is part of the families' everyday struggle, but also structural issues are mentioned that are beyond the services' solving capacity (see Kojan and Fauske 2011). Both issues are typical in the childcaring situation for which they take the main responsibility. The mothers may, as such, be defined as performing responsible mothering by taking care of not just their children but of the whole family.

However, when one does not give attention to contextual and situating factors and how such factors influence the mothering practices, failure to live up to idealized parenting standards may be understood and treated as just an individual incapacity and foster stereotypical beliefs about deficit parenting and othering (Fauske et al. 2018).

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[2] The participant's own emphasis.

4. Discussion

The aim of this article was to elicit and discuss how young mothers in contact with child welfare services in Norway narrated their challenges at different stages on the transition to adulthood and motherhood. The article also aimed at eliciting and discussing how the mothers narrated their interaction with child welfare services.

Although the mothers' stories differ, they represent a contrast to dominant social evaluations of postponed and planned parenthood (Schwiter 2011; Webb 2006), and their entries into adult roles may, thus, be understood as both aberrant and accelerated (Lee 2014).

Their childhood and teenage years, for instance, were embedded in major challenges and problems, including their complicated years in upper secondary education. Those years were characterized by partying and alcohol excess, but also by a quest for social recognition.

With the exception of the three of our informants, who in their narratives highly evaluated the support they had got from their foster homes during pregnancy and also afterwards even when they formally had left care, they had as mothers generally experienced being on their own without the intergenerational support implied in the concept interdependence, which represents a sharp contrast to prevailing notions on independency and self-fulfillment (Boddy et al. 2020). Here, we encounter a certain discrepancy between our results and the ideal implied in the Nordic child welfare model to prevent that children who grow up with psychosocial risks from developing problems with welfare and wellbeing later in life. Around the mothers participating in our study, there was no regular system, despite their troubled conditions of growth and transition years.

The aim of the article was only partially to explore the mothers' interaction with child welfare services. Yet, the mothers' stories about their years as mothers in contact with child welfare services make visible the complexity of a mothering practice with longstanding strives for receiving relevant, meaningful, and effective help for their children, especially the firstborn ones. Through their fighting for adequate help and support and acknowledgment as "good enough" mothers, some of the participants seemed to view child welfare as a potentially dangerous and stigmatizing institution, implying reluctance to initiate contact.

Young mothers with disadvantaged backgrounds, early pregnancies, and involvement in child welfare risk becoming viewed as not qualified to assess their children's needs. Rather, they tend to be viewed as in need of parental guidance from professional knowledge regimes (Hays 1996; Lee 2014). Evaluated against the binary distinction between "good" and "bad" mothering, they may even risk being referred to as bad mothers (Hays 1996; May 2008), thus becoming part of the problem (Gillies 2005; Fletcher et al. 2008; Gaudie et al. 2010; Brännström et al. 2015). Indeed, two of the mothers in our sample stated that the guidance they received was helpful, as it gave them some tools for managing difficult caregiving and upbringing situations. The remaining five, however, seemed to be trapped in ongoing defeats. Their attempts to develop a caregiving practice in accordance with the normative expectations that the social workers convey were often disapproved of by child welfare. Hence, the child welfare services may not be sensitive to different contexts and the processual and practical aspects of parenthood (Juhl 2017). A sidelong glance from the child welfare authorities at the mother's social, material, and political context seems to be lacking in the narratives, which represents a risk that the longstanding daily life complexities and the network of partially insolvable problems into which the mothers are interwoven may be conceptualized as personal incapacities, particularly incapacities related to mothering. Other research on parents in contact with child welfare suggests that dominant discourses that guide the practices and toils are decontextualized and understood in a middle-class perspective on good motherhood (Hays 1996). In other words, the distinction between "disembedded" and "embedded" individualization introduced by Dawson (2012, p. 313) tends to be ignored. "Disembedded" individualization according to Dawson, is the result of individual choices, while "embedded" individualization is linked to structural features like class and social capital that influence one's opportunities to make life choices (Dawson 2012, p. 313)

The context-free parenting guidance and support the mothers receive may, as such, alienate the mothers from their life situations and their own understanding of care (Fauske et al. 2018; Andrews 2002). Interestingly, when talking about how they struggle both with their children and with their parenting, the mothers still allotted little or no attention to the family's socioeconomic and material conditions as part of the explanation of why they struggle. Thus, the tendency to accommodate the dominant discursive regime that understands mothering as an individual actor—based responsibility deprived of its social context (Gillies 2008) may affect both mothers and childcare workers.

All mothers participating in the study positioned themselves in accordance with "good mother" discourses when talking about their strategies for not giving up and seeking help for their children's problems, despite several barriers (Gillies 2005). The mothers' narratives about their interaction with the child welfare as either good or difficult corresponded with how the social workers, according to the mothers' narratives, conveyed respect or disrespect. How meanings are ascribed to the challenges and problems parents experience is not just about feelings of respect or disrespect, but may, according to the stories, be crucial for getting relevant and effective support. Breaking up from their former lives and transforming themselves into a mother identity was not a simple choice for all. A few mothers initially tended to experience a situation of being caught between two different worlds (DeVito 2010) in which they accepted different care arrangements as solutions for their children. By regaining custody of the child and accomplishing normative motherhood in accordance with dominant expectations of being a responsible mother, they also exhibited a "moral career" (Goffman 1963).

Yet, when highlighting the challenges throughout adolescence and their lives as young mothers, they narrated themselves as both fighters and survivors in dealing with complicated and demanding everyday lives. Viewed in this perspective, a possible contradiction exists between the expectations of help-seeking behaviors that denote "the good mother" and the way in which they have experienced encounters with services when asking for help and support in a self-assertive way.

The experiences that the mothers had in their very first part of the transition gave reason for the drastic changes in the young women's lifestyles in terms of reducing their alcohol intake and distancing themselves from a risky network, a change that may be termed a "turning point" (Rutter 1996). Although not planned, they talked about the pregnancy as a period with growing responsibility for the coming child, which appears to correspond with other studies showing that young parenthood can foster new responsibility (Duncan 2007; Connolly et al. 2012). The stories about the care of their new-born child, although with little or no support from family or child welfare, may be understood as a given and rapid adaption to the normatively regulated moral expectations of responsible mothering (May 2008). However, while most mothers paid more attention to how their problems were accompanied by feelings of anger, sadness, and resignation, they also experienced satisfaction when their struggling led to receiving good help. The parenting practices then emerged as connected to and influenced by other practices (Finch 2007; Juhl 2017), especially practices within child welfare, but also education, working life and other welfare arrangements.

After all, the mothers thus also make apparent a tendency of self-support. The mothers in the life course interviews focused on the mothering role and practices and delineated a transformation process that starts from an uncertain and dependent self, continuing via a gradual accumulation of experiences into a self that is taking hold of their entire family's life (Miller 2007). Here, a growing agentic position appears to be displayed.

5. Strengths and Limitations

It should be acknowledged that this research includes only seven mothers. Although the mothers lived in different municipalities and thus had contact with different child welfare services, the findings do not allow for generalization to the population, but they may serve to supplement previous research. Other limitations may be related to the fact that the stories are told in retrospect. Interviewers were told to avoid steering of the narratives to let the mothers' voice come forth. Yet this might may be illusionary around a theme that is highly discursive in its character. The findings are, nevertheless,

interesting, as they illuminate the complexity in the transition to adulthood for young women more than the conventional interview. All of these women but one had had troublesome backgrounds and became accidentally pregnant. A strength of the article is also that it has a narrative scope that embraces the very beginning of their transition to adulthood. Quite unexpectedly, a contrast between turbulence and non-direction on one hand, and relative self-determination, on the other hand, was shaped that may serve as a "plot" in narrative theory terminology.

6. Conclusions

Somewhat dependent on how the mothers in our study experienced contacting and receiving adequate help and support by child welfare, their stories are about longstanding striving for decency and fighting for help. This includes experiences with different relief institutions and their own health problems. As such, the narratives suggest that cumulative disadvantages regarding factors like parenting, education, working life, housing and social networks were likely to increase, even after the mothers had decided to enter the mothering role in socially acceptable ways. Measures that could prevent or moderate this tendency could, among other things, be to extend the period in care for youth in transition (Putnam-Hornstein et al. 2016). Child welfare services may also largely contribute by acknowledging both the complexity of the women's past and current experiences, their risk of accumulated disadvantage and their strengths by considering the mothers' broader living context when assessing "good enough" mothering practices. Besides, initiatives that could facilitate the completion of education and relieve difficulties encountered at the work market for the mothers and their spouses could be valuable.

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