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Norwegian polyamorous families and their experiences of kindergarten: a narrative inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a narrative inquiry (NI) of two Norwegian polyamorous families regarding their encounters with their children's kindergartens. NI as a theory and method is employed, along with discourse theory, to understand the experiences of these polyfamilies in Norway. Norway has declared its institutions to be discrimination-free but that does not allow for the formalization of polyamory as a legitimate relationship. The analysis focuses on restorying three experiences of the polyamorous families: becoming polyfamilies, disclosing their relationship to the children, and encounters with the kindergartens. The discussion highlights the dichotomy between the families' experiences when hiding and being open about their family arrangement; and the silent hegemony of monogamy underpinning a ray of policy documents framing kindergarten policy and practice (of collaborations with families).

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Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) researchers have generally reached a consensus on the wide range of benefits of parental collaboration, both in terms of ensuring children's well-being and supporting their future school performance (Epstein 2011; Garvis et al. 2022; Hornby 2011; Hryniewicz and Luff 2020; Hujala et al. 2009; Janssen and Vandenbroeck 2018; Vuorinen 2018). In line with this established knowledge base, the Norwegian Kindergarten¹ Framework Plan (UDIR 2017) obligates kindergartens to work in partnership and agreement with children's homes. Aware of the increasing diversity of cultures and family arrangements, the document outlines the requirement that professionals 'highlight diversity in family structures and ensure that all children see their family arrangements reflected in kindergarten' (UDIR 2017, 10). Moreover, the ways in which the kindergarten collaborates with each family should 'prevent the child from experiencing conflicts of loyalty between home and kindergarten' (UDIR 2017, 29).

While there is no research reporting on the implementation of these aspects of the Framework Plan, there is an annual national measure of parental satisfaction with

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kindergartens. In recent years, 89% of parents have reported satisfaction with these services, both in terms of the childcare they provide and the opportunities for parental collaboration (UDIR 2022). Insight into the dissatisfied 11% of the kindergarten users is limited and is usually related to im/migrant parents, who are reported to be overlooked by the majority discourses underpinning the daily functioning of the kindergartens (Solberg 2018; Sønsthagen 2020). Accordingly, the narrative inquiry (NI²) reported in this article is meant to achieve a broader understanding of the reasons for parental discontent with kindergartens by exploring the narratives of two polyamorous families.

Polyamory has been defined as a

... form of relationship in which people openly court multiple romantic, sexual, and/or affective partners. With an emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships, practitioners see polyamory as different from swinging – and from adultery – with the poly focus on honesty and (ideally) full disclosure of the network of relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them. Both men and women have access to multiple partners in polyamorous relationships, distinguishing them from polygynous ones in which only men are allowed multiple (female) partners. (Sheff 2011, 488)

Polyamory-based family arrangements can be called polyamorous families, polyfamilies, or polycules, and all of these terms will be used in this article. Norway is a country that has not recognized polyamory as a legitimate relationship that is possible to formalize; however, the existing policies recognize sexual orientation as a potential area of discrimination and aim to provide discrimination-free institutions (White Paper no. 49).

How to understand the kindergarten experience of polyamorous families in the supposedly discrimination-free context of Norway is the main question structuring this article. To answer this question, the article begins with a description of NI as a theory that embraces both the stories of individuals and their social and institutional contexts, thus enabling the depiction of narrative hegemonies. After that, the existing research on polyamory and polyfamilies with children is reviewed. Next, NI as a methodology is described, followed by the stories of the two polycules participating in the study. The discussion focuses on (a) the dichotomy between the families' experiences when hiding and being open about their family arrangements, and (b) the discursive hegemony of monogamy underpinning a diverse array of policy documents, including the Framework Plan for Kindergarten (UDIR 2017) and White Paper no. 49 (2003–2004), which promotes discrimination-free institutions. The conclusion points to the importance of unmasking these exclusionary hegemonic narratives that serve as the foundation for kindergarten policy and practice.

Narrative inquiry – a theory embracing experience as a story in its (storied) context

NI departs from the well-established assumption that human experience of the world is narrative, and that people make sense of the world through living their own and others' stories (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). A story becomes the portal through which 'the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful' (Connelly and Clandinin 2006, 375). An (human) experience is thus 'a storied phenomenon' (Clandinin et al. 2016, 575). However, as individual experiences and stories always take place within a wider context, 'the focus of narrative inquiry is not only on individuals' experience, but also

the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted' (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007, 42).

Existing within greater narratives, individual stories confirm or challenge the established narrative hegemonies underpinning the existing social, cultural, and institutional narratives and norms. Challenging the established hegemonies of meaning implies dealing with historical, political, and religious powers presenting some narratives as 'natural and received shape of the world' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 23) – a world that is taken for granted by the majority. The silent repetition of taken-for-granted assumptions and norms in the diverse individual stories (of the majority) strengthens this hegemony through the illusion of polyvocality and diversity (Ewick and Silbey 1995), while it is often only one narrative that is being repeated by different individuals. For example, diverse stories about marriage create an impression of a variety of voices and perspectives, but all the stories may also silently confirm the norm of monogamous marriage as the obvious form of engaging in a romantic relationship.

A hegemonic narrative thus creates the 'only possible' and 'obvious' representations of cultural practices and employs societal institutions in its stabilization and reproduction (Clegg 1993). The stabilization and reproduction happen by silencing and excluding other stories (Ewick and Silbey 1995), so that the hegemonic version appears as a 'natural and received shape of the world' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 23) – not as a story that won a narrative battle with alternative meanings, but one which is indeed genuinely natural. NI, by encouraging the telling and retelling of the experiences of diverse phenomena or events from the perspectives of social actors whose life stories and backgrounds differ (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), challenges the monopoly and thus the potential hegemony of every story.

The act of polyamorous families sharing their experiences of kindergarten becomes then a matter of retelling the kindergarten from a perspective that is not very well known and that may easily be taken for granted as positive in such a society as Norway (that strongly highlights the discrimination-free policies in public institutions; White Paper no. 49).

Polyfamilies with children, their lives, and their collaboration with educational institutions – Overview of existing knowledge

The existing research with/on polyamorous families in American and Australian contexts, reveals a stressful dissonance between how (supportive and warm) the family feels from the inside and how (strange) it looks from the outside, particularly for the children (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter 2013; Sheff 2013). This tension seems to be strengthened by the implicit assumptions made by social actors or institutions regarding what constitutes a proper family (Sheff 2013).

Such assumptions are anchored in discursive hegemonies that attach the concept of a family to the figure of a married couple with a few children, which actively forecloses the possibility of perceiving the advantages of polyfamilies (Sheff 2013). These advantages are rooted in the defining characteristics of polyamorous families centred around their commitment to open and honest communication, mutual consent, high levels of intimacy, and compersion (Hardy and Easton 2017; Sheff 2011). Compersion, the opposite of jealousy, is defined as a positive emotional reaction to a loved one's other romantic or

sexual relationships (Hardy and Easton 2017). Open communication, a warm emotional climate, and respect for the virtues of friendship were also identified as essential to polyamorous relationships in a Norwegian study conducted by Træen and Thuen (2022). These qualities have an impact on the children growing up in polyamorous family arrangements.

On the nature of this impact, Sheff (2010) and Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter (2013) have both recognized it as exceedingly positive and have identified the following benefits of polyamorous family structures: (a) emotional intimacy with children due to fostering honesty and a diversity-friendly environment; (b) a greater amount of shared economic resources and people; (c) more personal time with each of the children due to 'the ability to distribute parenting' (Sheff 2010, 174); (d) greater attention to children due to the availability of adults; and (e) more positive role-model adults who communicate, negotiate, and have varying skills and interests (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter 2013, 125).

The availability of time and personal resources, together with highly developed social and communication skills, make polyfamilies potentially perfect collaborators with their children's educational institutions. Such socio-emotional competences have been described by education sociologists as both expected and rewarded by the (pre)school as an institution (Barg 2019; Lareau and Horvat 1999). Moreover, access to diverse groups of tutors their knowledge, competence and resources can strengthen and improve the school performance of children from polyamorous families (Anapol 2010).

Nevertheless, the research of Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter (2013) has revealed that due to the normative discourses underpinning educational institutions, polyfamilies are not perceived positively. In response, the families develop diverse strategies to manage information distribution about their structure to mitigate potential risks, such as bullying, harassment, or stress. The harassment and stressors originating from outside the family are described as having a highly negative effect on children and are mostly experienced in contact with educational, health, and family services (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter 2013).

As revealed in the study of Sheff (2013), poly-children, particularly older children and teenagers, are often those who, after being confronted with the community's normative discourses, develop diverse manoeuvring and lying strategies. To protect children from community reactions, some polyfamilies choose a strategy referred to by Pallotta-Chiarolli et al. as 'passing as normal and keeping secrets' (2013, 121). For others, the need to be open about one's arrangement is more important. However, this opens them up to being perceived as 'polluting outside worlds by coming out and presenting their relationships as legitimate and worthy of official affirmation' (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter 2013, 122). Avoidance of being the 'pollution' and the consequences of such a perception for children is considered to be the reason for about 70% of polyfamilies not coming out to their children (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter 2013).

The life experience of polyamorous families in Norway grows at a unique intersection between a cultural narrative with a well-anchored norm of monogamy (Træen and Thuen 2022) and a well-established democracy with policies declaring support for discrimination-free institutions (White Paper no. 49, 2003–2004).

Narrative inquiry as a methodology – accessing (marginalized) human experience as a story

Before describing the NI conducted with the two polyamorous families, NI is presented here as a methodology. The more general description will allow me to clarify and justify the diverse aspects of the reported study, such as the value of conducting a study with (only) two families, through which the parents tell the stories of their children.

The ethics of polyvocality and challenging narrative hegemonies

NI is a methodology for accessing and understanding human experiences as stories (Clandinin 2013) from a specific ethical and relational standpoint (Caine, Estefan, and Jean Clandinin 2013). Based on an underlying awareness of discursive hegemonies, NI intends to create polyvocal spaces where not only the most known and representative experiences/stories are articulated, but also those that are unusual, silenced, or marginalized come to be heard (Clandinin 2013; Ewick and Silbey 1995). Such stories provide new insights and challenge the existing hegemonic, cultural, and institutional narratives, thus contributing to ‘rewriting social life in ways that are, or can be, liberatory’ (Ewick and Silbey 1995, 199). With new insights and polyvocality at stake, accessing the stories of two polyamorous families is more beneficial than interviewing a high number of average families who may be satisfied with the kindergartens (UDIR 2022). In narrative scholarship, the repetition of the same narrative expressed by many individuals is seen as strengthening hegemony through the illusion of polyvocality (Ewick and Silbey 1995).

When storying the human experience, the key elements of temporality and sociality remain key to the NI process (Clandinin 2013). The temporality accounts for the time-related changes and dynamics in the story. As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) put it, ‘events under study are in temporal transition’ (479), allowing for a non-chronological flow of events and intertwining actors, feelings, and reactions from both the past and the present.

Aspects of sociality and the child perspective in parental stories

The element of sociality relates to the perspectives of different social actors and institutions, as well as the cultural narratives within which individual stories are constituted, communicated, and/or silenced (Clandinin 2013; Clandinin and Rosiek 2007). Sociality in this sense also allows one to retell one’s own story from the perspective of another social actor, and the polyamorous parents participating in the NI for this study took the perspectives of their children from time to time to retell their experiences in their own stories. Staying in a close (parental) relationship with the children made the participating parents sensitive to the experiences of their children and allowed them to better understand their children’s perceptions (Sommer, Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2010). It is important to underline, however, that the reported NI was conducted only among adults, and not children, and that the parents shared the stories that they thought their children would be comfortable with.

Research on the parental kindergarten experience

The polyfamilies whose experiences are shared below participated in a more expansive qualitative research project entitled ‘Parental experience of Norwegian kindergartens: Majority

and minority perspectives', which was conducted between September 2019 and June 2020. The aim of the project was to understand the institution of kindergartens through the diversity of parental experience of it. The polyfamilies were some of the first to contact the project leader regarding their interest in informing others about their unique experiences at the intersection of the cultural majority (white, Norwegian middle-class) and marginalized minority (in terms of sexual orientation, family arrangement, and lifestyle).

The parents participating in the study were able to share their experiences in the form of recorded or unrecorded semi-structured interviews or narratives co-written with the researcher. The choice of method was part of the informed consent to participate in the research. The polyfamilies chose the option of co-writing the stories with the researcher, as it seemed the safest and most comfortable way of sharing their experience.

Polyfamilies participating in the project

The polyfamilies who participated in the NI are marked here by P1 (polyfamily 1) and P2 (polyfamily 2). At the time of the project, they were living in two different regions of Norway. Both P1 and P2 were living in one household with all partners and children.

P1 was a family consisting of two men, three women, and four children aged 14, 10, four, and two. The children knew who their biological parents were; however, the family preferred calling everyone by their first name. The children used the terms 'mom' and 'dad' when they needed help from any of the adults, while names were used when a particular person was needed. All the adults involved in this relationship worked in arts-related fields. When telling their stories, they presented themselves with fictional names from fairy tales: Prince, Princess, Little Red Riding Hood, Robin Hood, and Cinderella. Prince and Princess were the biological parents of Per (14) and Pia (10), Robin Hood and Little Red Riding Hood were the biological parents of Pernille (4), and Robin Hood and Cinderella were the biological parents of Pelle (2).

The second family, P2, consisted of two men (Kristian and Tommy), one woman (Agnes), and a child of four years (Emily). The fictional names were chosen by the P2 themselves. All the adults worked in the private sector connected to industry. Emily used the term 'mom' in relation to Agnes and 'dad' when she wanted any of the fathers to help her. She used the names of the fathers when she needed only one of them.

Co-writing the stories

NI is a relational methodology (Clandinin et al. 2016), which means that the researcher, by living alongside a group, tries to write down the subject's storied experiences. The polyfamilies chose the option of co-writing their stories with the researcher. As the researcher, I met each of the families four times in September and October 2019. The first drafts of the families' stories were written by me based on my notes from the first meetings. However, the drafts were re-written by the families and were discussed during the following meetings.

The co-writing work resulted in three pages of text from P1 and a two-page-long text from P2. In the co-created texts, there are lines that the families defined as representing the narrative of the entire polyfamily (quotes are marked with P1/P2) and comments on the margin to indicate parts that were written by a particular person (quotes are marked with the fictional names of the participants).

Formal ethical commitments

The research project 'Parental experience of Norwegian kindergarten: Majority and minority perspectives', of which this NI was a part, was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The choice of method was part of the informed consent to participate in the research. All parents participating in the project could share their experiences in the form of recorded or unrecorded semi-structured interviews or narratives co-written with the researcher, as in NI. The polyamorous families chose the method of NI, and this allowed them to avoid sharing any personal data (here: voice), which was particularly important for protecting the privacy of the children mentioned in the stories. While protecting their anonymity, they also wanted their voices to be heard and to affect public discourse. This meant that making their voices heard also had to be part of the ethical commitment to the research participants (Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin 2013). All were informed of the possibility of withdrawing from the research project at any point without giving any reason for such a decision.

Data analysis and relational ethical commitments

The process of analysing narrative data is about "restorying" a story from the original raw data' (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002, 330). What this meant in this case was that the analysis was not necessarily focused on finding themes, but rather events, stages, turning points, human beings involved, contexts/places, and the more or less logical relationships between all of these factors. As the raw data are usually gathered as pieces of stories collected through interviews or informal conversations, the process of restorying needs to trace the narrative continuity (Connelly and Clandinin 1990) and entangle all the components that build the story (e.g. events, stages, turning points, human beings, and contexts) into a coherent entirety.

To balance the researcher's power in this process (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002), both polyfamilies were involved in restorying and rewriting their experiences. After my work with identifying the personal experiences (within the polycules) and social experiences (polycules' interactions with kindergartens), and then searching for continuity in the relationships between experiences and turning points (Connelly and Clandinin 1990), the initial drafts of the stories were presented to the families for their re-storying and retelling of the experiences. To give the participants a sense of the overall story unfolding in the research, the stories of the other polycules were presented to them anonymously. Both families saw value in finding joint stages and/or turning points, together with highlighting their own paths and experiences that only one of them had gone through. In the final analytical work, we agreed that the families had three different experiences to tell: becoming a polycule, disclosing their status to the children, and their encounters with the kindergartens.

Findings

The presentation of the findings is shaped by these three experiences, two of which are personal and the third of which is social (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). The polycules' personal experiences are important to retell in this research, as they are stories that the

polyfamilies were denied from sharing in the social contexts of the kindergartens. The figures visualizing the main stages of each story contain both the events that were common for both families (in grey) and the events present only in the stories of either P1 or P2 (in colours). All of the experiences mentioned in the figure are written in the text below with **bold italics**.

Becoming polycules

The experience of *becoming polycules* comprises diverse events and turning points prior to defining one's own relationship as a triad or quad. As presented in [Figure 1](#) both polycules started as **marriages**, by which they meant a monogamous romantic relationship following the mainstream path of starting a family. The origins of P1 go back to Prince and Princess, 'who once upon a time met, fell in love, got married, and were supposed to live happily ever after' (P1). What they experienced was, however, a particular form of **unhappiness and unfulfillment** in coming together to live their lives:

'Something must be wrong with me – I'm not living happily ever after', thought both Prince and Princess.

This brought them to counselling, and the therapist advised them to start a joint project: a child. The **child project** did not bring fulfilment or happiness either, even though they loved each other and the child. Around a year after the second child was born, they secretly started meeting other people. They called it **cheating and loving**, as cheating did not affect their love for each other. Rather, it allowed them to discover that they were able to love more people at one time, which led them to the stage of **honest talk** that resulted in the decision to **rearrange the relationship**. They agreed on establishing a **consensually open marriage**, which would entail honestly communicating about meeting other people and introducing each other to partners to whom they felt emotionally attached. Prince became emotionally involved with Robin Hood and Princess with Little Red Riding Hood. After about a year, they all decided to move in together and live as a **quad** of two bisexual women and men. Two years later, Cinderella, a heteroflexible woman, joined P1.

The stages of a **marriage** and **cheating and loving** also occurred in P2's story. The cheating was a consequence of Agnes falling in love with her workmate Tommy. As falling in love with a new person did not affect her love for her husband, Kristian, she initiated **honest talk**. She talked to each of the men separately and then arranged a meeting with them. The meetings and talks continued over the course of six weeks and resulted in them starting a **triad**, which is how the **relationship was re-arranged**. After two years in the triad, they decided to have a **child** together.

Disclosing to the children

As presented in [Figure 2](#), the disclosure to the children happened differently for those born in the polycule, as opposed to those who witnessed the regular marriage's development into it. Prince and Princess already had two children when opening up their relationship, but as the stage title of **children protected from the re-arrangement's fluidity** signals, Pia and Per were not told about any change in the agreement among the parents. They started to be informed when the parents sensed some stability and

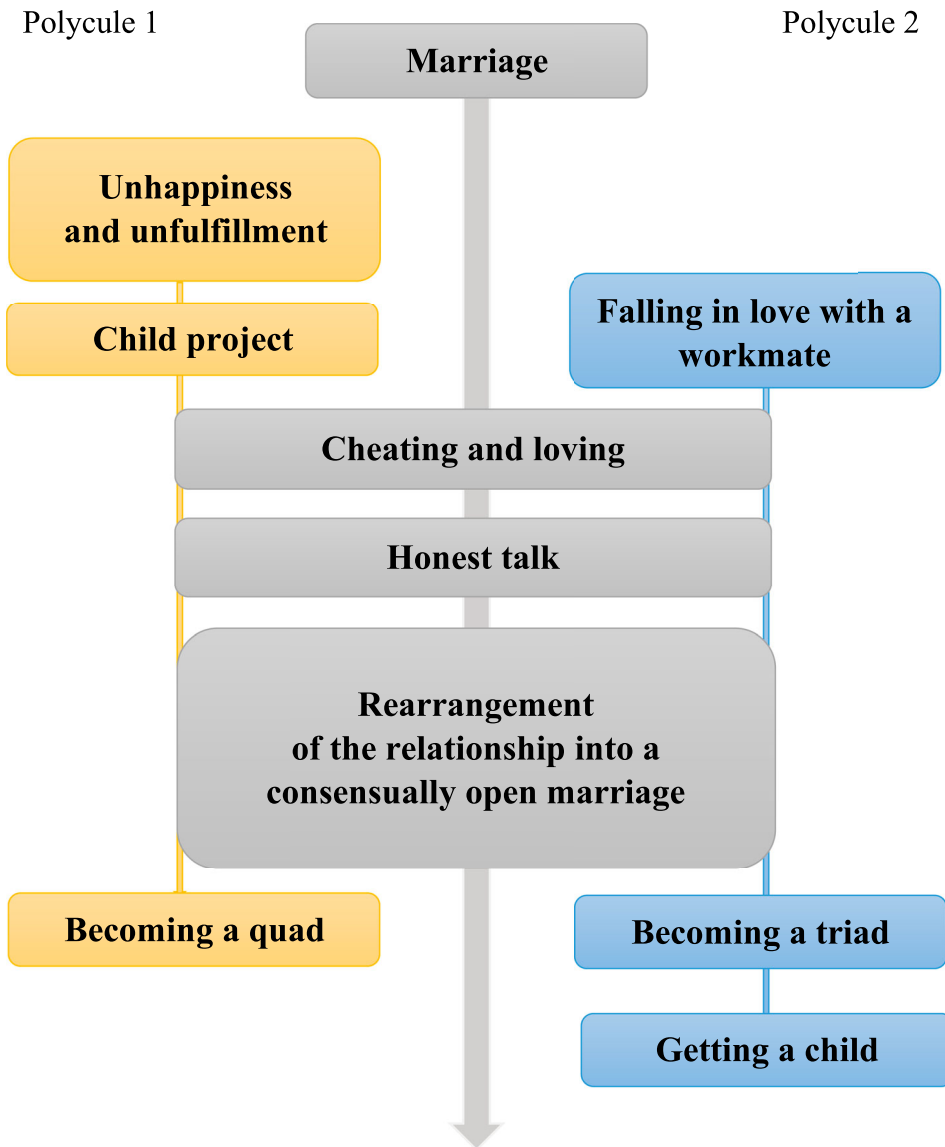


Figure 1. Stages of becoming polycules.

emotional connection with their new partners. When disclosing their changes to the children, the parents focused on **adjusting the information to the children's ability to understand**. As Prince and Princess operationalized this subtheme,

First we told the kids that we, exactly as they do, have very close friends, whom we invite to stay overnight (...) it was important to us to explain this to the children through words and experiences that they could relate to.

After making the decision to live as a quad, adjusting the information to the children's ability to understand was additionally strengthened by the four adults being actively involved in **developing relationships with the two children** of Prince and Princess,

Polycule 1

Polycule 2

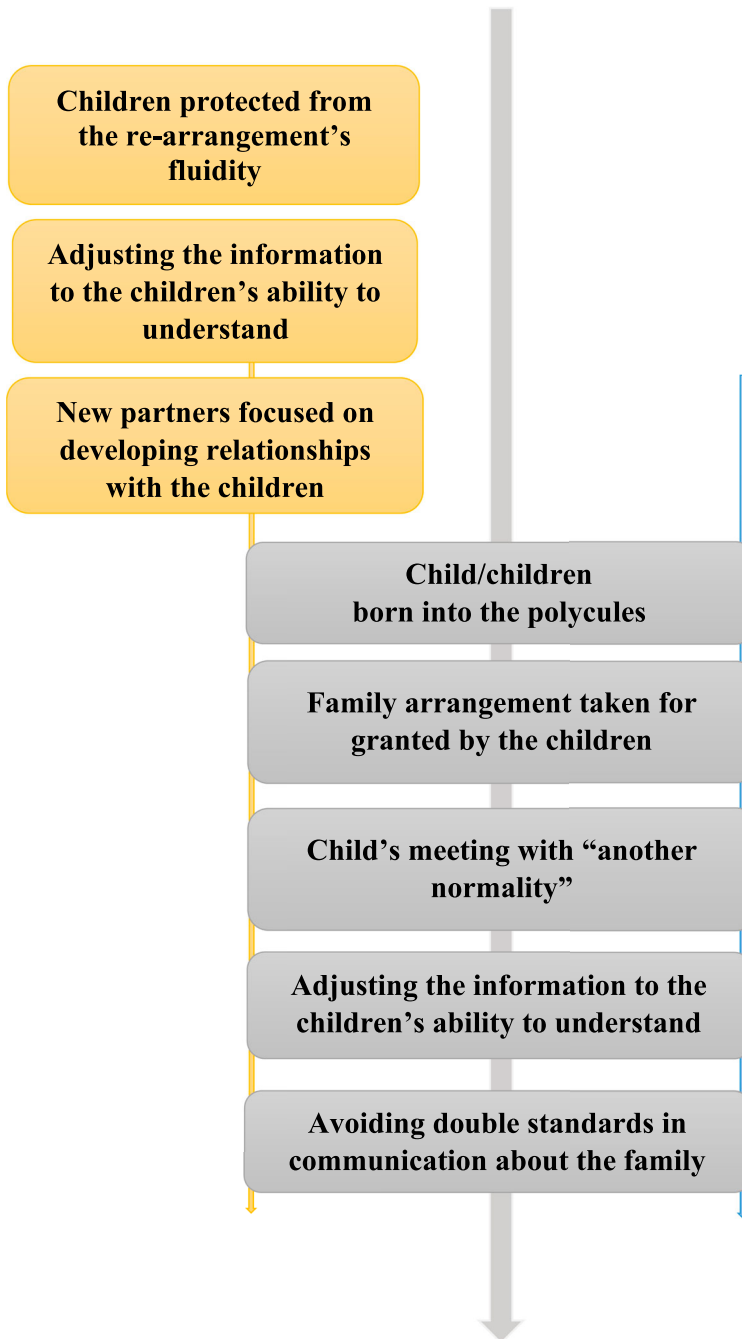


Figure 2. Disclosure to the children.

so that Pia and Per knew that it was not just their parents who had gotten a new boyfriend and girlfriend, but that we are all here for them, that each can offer them different activities and resources, and that they are loved by all of us – that we are all the same tribe. (Little Red Riding Hood)

Those children who were born into the tribe viewed the **family arrangement** as being **taken for granted**. The disclosure to the children came in response to the **child's meeting with 'another normality'**. 'All my friends have only one daddy or no one. Why do I have two?' asked Emily once, which initiated P2's explanation of their arrangement:

We tried to **adjust the information** about us to what Emily could understand. We bought a book about different families with pictures of children living with, for example, a father and grandmother, single parents, homosexual parents, or bonus siblings. We said that our family was not yet in the book but that we were just one of the many possible ways of being a family. We also said that some adults can love more than one person, and that we are such adults. (P2)

This situation was analogous to that of the two youngest children in P1:

Pernille and Pelle took our family arrangement for granted, and as it felt good and safe, they never asked why we were living like this unless they were introduced to another family model. Then, Pernille asked, 'Why do some children have only two parents?' (P1)

The 'only two parents' of the other children show how the phenomena that we grow up with and take for granted easily become part of a standard, hegemonic narrative through which we perceive everyone's difference as something unusual and strange.

Avoiding double standards in communication about the family arrangement is the last aspect of the experience identified in relation to both children born into polycules and those who saw its development. Being open and clear about one's own arrangement with the community was seen by the polycules as a way of communicating this arrangement to the children. Therefore, both polycules insisted on the possibility of coming out, for example, during parental meetings (P1). P2, who consciously and consequently lied to Emily's first kindergarten, saying that Tommy was an uncle, 'realised that in the long run, calling the same person "dad" at home and "uncle" at the kindergarten may confuse her and make her insecure about her family arrangement and us' (P2).

Polyfamilies' experiences of kindergartens

Figure 3 stages the polyfamilies' experiences of kindergartens, which changed diametrically when the polyfamilies tried to be open about their arrangements. When they were 'passing as normal' (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter 2013, 121) and keeping the story to themselves, they felt respected and involved by the kindergartens.

'Passing as normal' was, however, not ultimately the choice of the family. P2 did so because the process of registering the truth turned out to be time-consuming, complicated, and not completed when they needed to apply for a kindergarten spot for Emily. Silencing the story of their own arrangement was a **continuation of a bureaucratic lie**, a burden that was already placed on P2 at the birth clinic:

As Kristian and Agnes were married, the system assumed the coming child of Agnes to be Kristian's, even though we all knew that Tommy was the father. Before the birth, it was

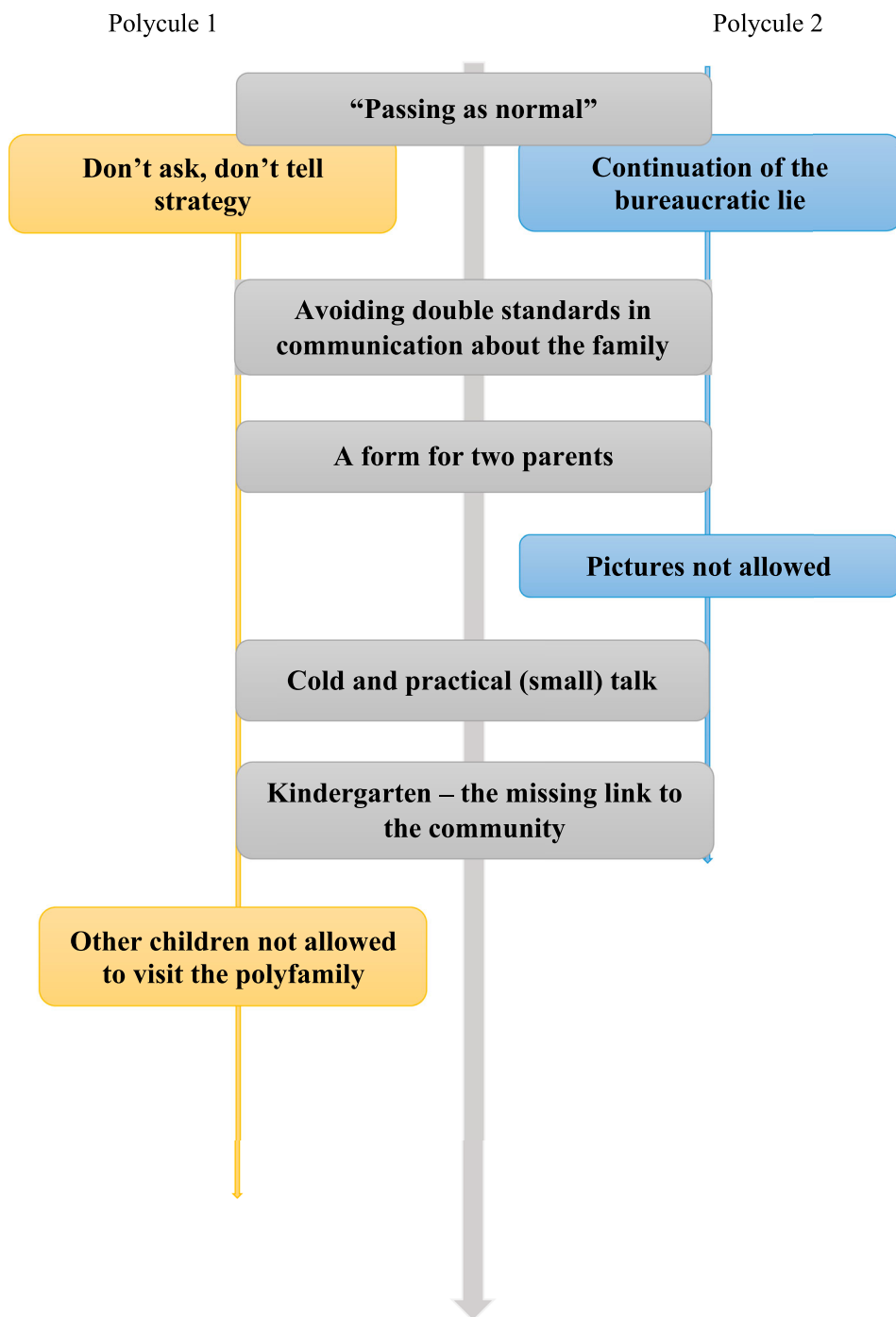


Figure 3. Stages of kindergarten experience.

impossible to deal with this in any public office. Tommy was not entitled to apply for parental leave before the DNA tests were completed. When leaving the hospital after the birth, we received a birth certificate with Kristian's name listed as the father ... We knew it would

take a long time to fix this, and since in Norway, you apply for the kindergarten spot right after the birth, we just applied as Agnes and Kristian, so the kindergarten received our names, and we were not courageous enough to inform them a year later about our real arrangement. (P2)

This example shows the family's experience of their story being told and their life being defined by the legal apparatus, bureaucratic procedures, and established forms months before the child was born and before they could act on initiating any changes. In the process of rectifying the formalities connected to Tommy's fatherhood, he was introduced as an uncle who 'sometimes will bring and pick up Emily from the kindergarten' (Tommy). This resulted in a positive collaboration with the kindergarten, exactly as in the case of P1, who followed a **don't ask, don't tell** strategy, whereby the (pre)school was allowed to assume that the family was a kind of divorced monogamous marriage and each of the parts had remarried. Such a way of 'passing as normal' (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter 2013, 121) was additionally supported by the accommodation arrangement:

In the big city, we were living in two flats as neighbours, so many people did not know what kind of family arrangement we really had. The teacher thought we were divorced and were a kind of bonus family with my-yours-our children. (P1)

When encountering kindergartens in new places of living, where the families wanted to be open about their arrangements, they experienced restrictions on being allowed to come and participate as they were. The narrative assumption of monogamy underpinning the kindergarten expectations towards the families was never articulated to the families directly. The families talked, however, about **a form for two** parents, which was suddenly presented to them as a document justifying collaboration with only the biological parents of children:

When all five of us came, the teacher left the room and came back with the headmaster. We explained our unconventional family structure. We said that for Pernille and Pelle, who were born into the polycule, this family felt normal. The headmaster appreciated the explanation but said that the kindergarten could only talk to the parents whose names were written on the registration form of each child. (P1)

The teacher said that on the registration form for Emily, there were only two spaces for parents' names and that only these two people could be present at the meeting. This was when Kristian had to leave. (P2)

Another form of rejection that prevented the polyfamilies from appearing as they were in the kindergarten space occurred when P2 wanted to bring their family picture:

All the children from the unit had their families represented in the pictures on the wall of the entrance. Some turned out to live with one parent or a grandparent; some turned out to have two moms. 'How wonderful that you show the children the diversity of their families', I said, and the teacher responded that it was the Framework Plan that obligated the kindergarten to do this. I was looking forward to making such a family picture with Emily. (Agnes)

When Agnes asked about the picture at the parental conference (after Kristian was asked to leave), the teacher informed that kindergarten had introduced a new rule of **pictures not allowed**:

'There will be too many questions from other children', she said. Suddenly, the Framework Plan was not important. As an equality practice, they took down all of the family pictures from the wall. (Agnes)

Rejecting the family's arrangement by allowing only the biological parents to participate in a parental conference, and (in the case of P2) silencing their visual story, reduced parental collaboration to daily **cold and practical (small) talk**:

They never talk to us like to the other parents; they never ask about how the siblings are doing or how work is. There is no small talk. There is only practical information, such as, 'Remember to bring the wet rain clothes home', or, 'Do not forget that there is a trip tomorrow'. (Cinderella)

The impossibility of being themselves in kindergarten settings was experienced by the families as having an impact on their (well)being in the local community. This appeared in the narratives of both polycules but was of particular importance for P1, as in their new, rural location, the kindergarten was an epicentre of the local community's social life. By not confirming the polycules as full-fledged members of the parental and local communities, the **kindergarten** became the families' **missing link**:

We know that from day one, there was gossip about a strange family with so many adults who had moved in. We wanted to present ourselves at the first parental meeting, but we were rejected. We proposed to the headmaster that we could pay for an invited lecture on diverse family configurations, which could function as a relevant introduction to our presentation, but this idea was rejected as well. All the possible ways of telling our stories were blocked, and we felt that without hearing our stories, people could only repeat their own biased ones. (P1)

The blocked possibility of unbiasing the family arrangement resulted in

... none of the children's friends [being] allowed to come and visit us. When we send a birthday invitation, we always receive text messages with a variety of excuses. This is very sad, and this is something that the kindergarten could help us with, for example, by allowing us to visit with the whole unit for lunch or to present ourselves to others. (Cinderella)

Institutional recognition was seen by the family as necessary for the polycules' integrity in the communities and to ensure the children's healthy relationships with their peers.

Discussion

When discussing the *kindergarten experience of polyamorous families* in the context of a supposedly *discrimination-free Norway*, two aspects of the findings are especially significant:

- a) the difference in the experience of the collaboration with kindergartens when 'passing as normal' (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter 2013, 121) as opposed to being open about one's own arrangement;
- b) the experience of the Framework Plan being invalidated, and an administrative form, developed and used at the level of a single kindergarten/kindergarten owner, being deferred to instead.

Through the active use of NI, I interpret the first aspect as unmasking a hegemonic narrative of monogamy that underpins the kindergarten's expectations of the parents and defends its own hegemony (by silencing other possible stories). When discussing the experience of the Framework Plan being invalidated, I imply NI's dimension of sociality (Clandinin 2013). This allowed me to read the Framework Plan as a story contextualized by the 'stories' of other policy documents (White Paper no. 49; Ministry of Children and Families 2020). While these documents do not directly forbid polyamory, at the same time, they do not create a discrimination-free context for consensually non-monogamous family arrangements.

It is important to underline that when discussing the powers of narratives, the attitudes and intended actions of the kindergarten staff are not addressed. With the use of NI I (only) trace the work of the narrative hegemonies in the kindergarten experiences of P1 and P2, and the policy-based context of their stories.

Passing as normal for acceptance by the discursive hegemony of monogamy

The dissonance between the same families' experiences of the kindergartens when being/pretending to be in monogamous relationships and when being open about their (polyamorous) arrangements reveals that breaking out from the norm of monogamy was the reason for the rejection and exclusion. Passing as normal, pretending, and thus confirming the hegemonic narrative did not bring any problems to the families in their collaborations with the kindergartens. After disclosing their status to the kindergartens, the staff refused to collaborate with anyone other than the biological parents, and the polyfamilies were not allowed to communicate their own arrangements to the parental community, either in the form of pictures (P2) or via a presentation at a parental meeting (P1). The practices of rejection and silencing may be seen as a defence against the natural state of monogamy as the only possible foundation of a family.

The polyfamilies' open communication of their arrangements became an act of 'polluting' (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, and Hunter 2013, 122) the narrative and the social space of the community. This act of 'polluting' was about challenging the natural and only possible status of monogamy. After allowing for other family arrangements to be heard and become visible, monogamy could continue to be the form chosen by the majority, but it would forever lose its status as genuinely natural and obvious. This is why the communication of the polystories activated the practices of rejection and the kindergarten's refusal to legitimise the poly arrangements. The **cold and practical (small) talk** could thus be seen as an additional preventative measure against the formation of a warmer communicative climate (which could be easily misunderstood by the families as a softening of the rejection).

When 'passing as normal' (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010, 121), the polyfamilies do not disturb monogamy's hegemony and obviousity. In fact, what they are doing is quite the opposite; by making an effort to pretend and lie, they confirm and stabilize monogamy as the only possible narrative (even more so than families based on monogamous arrangements).

Hegemony of monogamy invalidating the Framework Plan versus Framework Plan as a story stabilizing hegemony

The exclusionary practices mentioned above were experienced by the families as counteracting the Framework Plan (UDIR 2017) especially its sections directly obligating the kindergartens to ‘ensure that all children see their family arrangements reflected in kindergarten’ (UDIR 2017, 10).

This experience could have been strengthened by the fact that the kindergartens justified exclusion of the non-biological parents by pointing at a subdocument, which in this case was an administrative form (with room for only two parents). The administrative form represents a lower level of authority than the national Framework Plan, as it is created at the level of the kindergarten owner for administrative convenience. Switching into a local, administrative form was thus seen by the families as invalidating the Framework plans inclusion and generosity towards diverse family arrangements.

However, if we read the Framework Plan in its sociality, as reflecting the other policy documents, the polyfamilies’ perceptions of the Framework Plan’s inclusive and discrimination-free character may be challenged. For instance, documents promoting discrimination-free institutions (White Paper no. 49) and gender-related policies (Ministry of Health and Care 2016) focus on sexuality and gender as sources of discrimination, but they do not mention forms of relationships other than those that are monogamous (White Paper no. 49). The ‘Marriage Act’ (Ministry of Children and Families 2020) allows for hetero – and homosexual marriages, adoption, and assisted insemination for lesbian *couples*, but states clearly that ‘no person may contract a marriage if a previous marriage or registered partnership subsists’ (Section 4). Other forms of formalized commitment/partnerships are also possible only between *couples*.

The Framework Plan for kindergartens (UDIR 2017), as being created within this legal apparatus, may be read as building on the same silent hegemony of monogamy and couples being the foundations of families. The Framework Plan’s obligation of ‘highlighting the family diversity’ (UDIR 2017) and reflecting the family arrangements of the children does not mention what kind of family arrangements are being included and which are not. This imprecise formulation of ‘family diversity’ (UDIR 2017) may initially make the polyfamilies feel included in the document, but when connecting the phrase to the other policy documents that shape and enact the Framework Plan, it may be interpreted as recognizing only the (monogamous) diversity of the legally allowed, homo – and heterosexual, divorced, and remarried monogamies.

In other words, the families’ experiences of the kindergartens ignoring and counteracting the Framework Plan may be interpreted in another way – not as kindergarten staff ignoring a discrimination-free Framework Plan, but as the powerful norm of monogamy serving as the basis for a diverse array of policy documents, including the Framework Plan (UDIR 2017) and the declaration on discrimination-free institutions (White Paper no. 49).

Conclusion

Unpacking neglected narratives makes hegemonic ones more visible and allows for reflection on the complexities of discrimination and the identification of good practices. This study explores the kindergarten experience of two polyfamilies in an apparently

discrimination-free Norway and concludes that Norway may not actually be a discrimination-free context. As diversity among families is growing, more research on families dissatisfied with kindergartens is needed to stimulate a deep and holistic rethinking of existing policies, including those beyond the education domain.

Notes

1. Kindergarten (Norwegian: *barenehage*) – a formal, but not compulsory early childhood education and care services for children aged 1–5, attended by 93.4% of all children in Norway (Statistics Norway 2023).
2. To keep the word limit expected by the journal, the abbreviation NI is further used for narrative inquiry.

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