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Vibeke Samsonsen & Inger Kristin Heggdalsvik

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# Critical realism as a fruitful approach to social work research as illustrated by two studies from the field of child and family welfare

Vibeke Samsonsen  and Inger Kristin Heggdalsvik 

Department for Health and Social Work, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Bergen, Norway

## ABSTRACT



This paper argues the case for taking a critical realist (CR) approach to social work research. The normativity in social work is often under-communicated in the social sciences, resulting in research that has an unclear value base as its starting point. Social work practice promotes social change and people's development, empowerment, and liberation. By taking a CR of view as a starting point for researching social problems, the focus shifts towards explaining phenomena by revealing and discussing the mechanisms through which they are produced and maintained. Child welfare issues are argued to be "wicked problems", on top of which the practice of social work itself is a complex field. Two studies from the field of child and family welfare are presented here to illustrate how CR has been fruitfully applied in research on such complex phenomena. These two studies comprise research on child protection assessment and parental high conflict.

## KEYWORDS

Critical realism; social work research; child and family welfare; wicked problems; transdisciplinarity

## Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the reflection and discussion on how critical realism can contribute fruitfully to social work research, as exemplified by two Norwegian research projects from the field of child and family welfare. Houston (2012) claims that methodological pluralism and intensive and extensive research designs are of vital importance in critical realist social work research. Inspired by this claim, we conducted studies within the context of a complex social world with systems and underpinning mechanisms. A classic approach in the social sciences is for the scientist to describe, explain, and understand, but not judge. Sayer (2011) argues that values and norms are a necessary part of life, and that any research claiming to be critical must have an opinion on the particular viewpoint giving rise to its criticism. Social work is loaded with normativity and morality, and we will argue in line with Kjørstad and Solem (2017), who emphasize the need for normative transparency. In order for social workers to identify unsatisfied needs and human rights, they must assess what is good and what is desirable from a normative viewpoint.

**CONTACT** Vibeke Samsonsen  vibeke.samsonsen@hvl.no  Inndalsveien 28, 5063 Bergen, Norway

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The global definition of social work is as follows: Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels (International Federation of Social Workers 2014). While this definition is based on professional practice, it also emphasizes that professional social child and family welfare work is an academic discipline (Kjørstad and Solem 2017).

As this definition makes clear, in terms of their focus on structures, social work practice and research, extend beyond individuality. In addition, power issues are present even in the definition, as is a demand for change. In his early work on critical realism as a new paradigm in science, Roy Bhaskar was already focusing on structures over individuality when he stressed that power is one of the most powerful mechanisms at play in society and claimed an emancipatory role for science (Bhaskar 1978).

Two studies from the field of child welfare are presented here to illustrate the fruitful application of critical realism, both philosophically and analytically, to research on complex phenomena. These two studies comprise research on child protection assessment and research on parental high conflict.

### **Critical social work and two social workers undertaking critical research**

Critical theory in general is an ideologically oriented approach to the study of human phenomena that focuses on power and empowerment structures related to the phenomena (Morris 2006). Elites accumulate and perpetuate power and resources in society and thereby creates oppression and disadvantage (Payne 2020). Even though social problems arise due to structural issues, the problems are experienced at the level of individual and the local community (Hutchinson and Oltedal 2017). Critical social work focuses on analysing the factors that underlie the present problems and helps social workers to avoid thinking that the way things are is the way they must be (Payne 2020). As researchers, we can never be free of our own values when observing the reality around us (Morris 2006). Critical realism offers a way of approaching the problems of social work that is in line with critical social work thinking. For two social workers committed to social action, this is an appealing alternative that makes sense when conducting social work research. The basic ontology of critical realism is that reality has an objective existence, and its basic epistemological assumption is that knowledge is conceptually mediated and thus open to adjustment. The most significant task for critical realist researchers is to explain phenomena by revealing and discussing the mechanisms that produce them (Danermark, Ekström, and Karlsson 2019). The event itself may not be what is most important, and the most fruitful perspective may be produced by the complex mechanisms, structures and tendencies which interact and counteract to produce the phenomena (Bhaskar 1978). This makes sense to us in the complex field of child and family welfare, with its ongoing political and public debates, potential conflicts of interest, and resource battles between service users and the public, with its highly pressured social workers, and with the mass media exerting a powerful influence on debate and change. Critical realism

separates reality into three domains: what actually happens, our perception of reality, and the 'mid-domain' consisting of mechanisms producing phenomena. The empirical material in these two studies can provide access to both 'what actually happens', and different stakeholders' perceptions of this 'reality'. Our analysis of some of the contextual mechanisms serves as an attempt to grasp the 'mid-domain'. After one of the authors attended a workshop with Roy Bhaskar at an international conference on critical realism in July 2013, critical realist ontology stood out as a key starting point for research, this being the notion that conflicting interests in society can potentially obstruct the production of the best possible phenomena. This first author's enthusiasm inspired the second author to take the plunge into critical realism and use it as the basis for Study 2, where the perspective yielded fresh insights and reflections on social work research. Thus, our aims when exploring the phenomena of child protection assessment and parental high conflicts as a professional task were to identify the mechanisms that are at play in the given contexts and what seems to constrain or support fruitful practices. These two projects are founded on the belief that identifying barriers and gateways to more fruitful practices can reveal new opportunities. An important inspiration has been the relationship between knowledge and practice and the search for phenomenological practice gaps (Longhofer and Floersch 2012; 2004), which also relates to Bhaskar (1978).

## Research context and phenomena

Norway provides the context for both studies. The first country in the world with a public child protection system, it has a long tradition of child welfare services (Samsonsen 2016). Norway's welfare system is centred on children and families' broad needs for services and interventions and is less risk-based than in most western countries (Christiansen 2011). In Norway, the term 'child protection system' incorporates elements of both protection and welfare, which are distinct in the English language. Norway is a wealthy country as a result of the discovery of oil in the 1970s, and it is also sparsely settled, having only 5,455 million inhabitants (Statistics Norway 2022). The government system is a strong social system with high income taxes and a broad redistribution of resources through the welfare state services. Even though Norway is a wealthy country, the proportion of families of low social economic status represented in the child welfare system far exceeds that of population on average (Kojan and Storhaug 2021).

Study 1 explores child protection assessments in Norway and England from a comparative perspective. Whereas Norway is a small country with a strong government system, England is a densely populated country with 56,191 million inhabitants (Statistics England 2022) and has a more liberal policy system. At the same time, the two countries have the same underlying concerns in child protection assessments: preventing child abuse and promoting welfare. Unfortunately, both countries have experienced tragic child deaths due to abuse and neglect, where the system has failed to prevent these deaths. However, there are established differences between the two countries' level of set assessment frameworks and mandatory procedures (Samsonsen 2016). These structural differences make it interesting to analyse and discuss how the same problem is addressed and understood in each system. One of the key issues in the international discourse on child protection assessments is the tension between seeking assessments that

have measurable scientific validity and seeking assessments that reflect the nature of each family's individual situation (Holland 2011).

Study 2 explores professional understanding and assessments of children entrenched in parental high conflict. Norway's family counselling services are the primary service for families with relational problems, including conflicts between parents. Nevertheless, parental high conflict is also highly represented in child welfare services and in district court. Literature and research show a variation in terminology used to describe parental high conflict, but the overall understanding is a relationship between parents who are mired in conflict (Anderson et al. 2010). Parental conflict is characterized by extreme mutual distrust that is intense and entrenched and has negative and maladaptive consequences for the children involved. International studies show that professionals, whatever their professional service, experience parental high conflict as complex and challenging (Black et al. 2016; Heggdalsvik, Lorås, and Samsonsen 2022; Houston, Bala, and Saini 2017). This study explores professional understanding and assessment in the intersection of family counselling services and child welfare services in Norway.

### **Study 1: assessment in child protection**

Over the last fifty years, the focus on and knowledge about child abuse and neglect have increased significantly in the western world. A common feature in child protection systems is the process of early assessment following a referral of concern. A number of assessment models have been developed that differ in complexity and structure. Norway and England serve to illustrate different assessment practices in this study. Two contrasting assessment frameworks have been explored: an open assessment framework with few mandatory guidelines and procedures (Norway), and a more structured assessment framework accompanied by many procedures (England) (Samsonsen 2016). Assessment issues may be shown along a continuum, with heavy reliance on structures and procedures at one end and minimal guidelines and heavy reliance on professional judgement at the other (Samsonsen and Turney 2016). The application of critical realism has provided the overarching perspective in this explorative study. Its focus on the mechanisms at play in assessment has been especially helpful in terms of explaining and discussing assessment phenomena within and beyond the two contexts in this study.

### **Study 2: assessment of parental high conflict**

Family as an institution has changed throughout history. The balance between the right of the individual to a family life versus the legal right of society to intervene when children may be at risk of maladjustment has been of public and professional interest. In the welfare system in Norway, two professional services have the mandate to assist children and families in need of assistance. Family counselling services are a professional low threshold service, and child welfare services are a security net service with a mandate to intervene in family life if needed. In practice, professional assessment of parental high conflict is conducted at an intersection of professional services with a wide range of mandates and legal frameworks. In order to analyse and understand the phenomenon of parental high conflict and to gain insight within and beyond the context of professional discretionary assessments and reasoning, the authors chose to apply critical realism and

discuss the professional assessment of family counsellors and child welfare case workers from an extended meta-perspective.

## Methodology

### Study 1

A qualitative design was chosen as this was an explorative study seeking an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms at play in child protection assessments. The study's data sources consisted of interviews with social workers in Norway and England and assessment documents from both countries. A total of 14 social workers from Norway and England participated in semi-structured interviews that lasted about one hour. The interviews took place primarily at the social workers' offices. A total of 11 parents, all with assessment experience, were also interviewed, primarily in their homes. These interviews lasted around an hour and a half. The social workers and parents were recruited through the city councils in Bergen, Norway and Bristol, England. Assessment reports from the same two city councils were received for 46 children: 20 from Norway and 26 from England. In the social work interviews, a thematic content analysis approach was used (Braun and Clarke 2006). In the research interviews with the parents, a narrative thematic analysis approach was used (Riessman 2008). The assessment reports were subjected to text analysis (Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori 2011). As this was an exploratory study on assessments in child protection, the underlying notion was that information from various sources may shed light on the same topic from different angles. This is resonant with the critical realist perspective on how complex mechanisms, structures, and tendencies interact and counteract (Danermark, Ekström, and Karlsson 2019).

### Study 2

The design of this study was based mainly on qualitative methods but with quantitative elements. The data were gathered by way of a digital survey and focus group interviews. Survey respondents consisted of 115 professionals from a variety of family counselling services in Norway. The survey included descriptive questions, Likert scale claims, and analytical open-ended questions in response to four constructed vignettes. Two focus group interviews were conducted in two different family counselling services and two focus group interviews were conducted in two different child welfare services, with 24 informants involved in all. In the focus group interviews, the informants were given cards with questions. To categorize the open-ended text in the survey, a conceptual analytical strategy was chosen (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Analysis of the focus group interviews was inspired by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022).

## Findings

We will report the overall findings of the two studies separately, then move on to some common features in the two studies' findings regarding a critical realist perspective on social work research.

## Study 1

Findings from this study were presented in three peer-reviewed scientific papers (Samsonsen and Turney 2016; Samsonsen and Willumsen 2014, 2015) and a PhD thesis (Samsonsen 2016). The guiding research questions for the overall study were as follows: What mechanisms are at play in assessments in the two contexts? What seems to constrain or support fruitful assessment practices? Additionally, what can we learn from each other in Norway and England in terms of such practices. The social workers in the two contexts reported that the assessment framework matters. The English social workers in the study found structural support in their Current Assessment Framework (CAF), but the found the accompanying procedures overwhelming. The computer system led to information being fragmented into small boxes to be ticked, which were seen as an obstacle to high quality assessment. In Norway, there seemed to be no standard procedure for assessment, and approaches varied between cases and social workers. At best, these individual approaches contributed to tailor-made assessments, but all of the social workers in this study would appreciate a standard framework for gathering information. Contextual factors influencing assessments differed greatly between the two countries. In England, a national culture of individual responsibility and putting the blame on social workers seems to have a major effect on child protection. This culture of blame, together with high workloads and structural demands, seems to create intolerable pressure over time. In Norway, the media debate was not as shrill as in England, so the national culture was not making social workers into scapegoats. The economic situation differs in Norway and England, with Norway experiencing fewer cutbacks in services for children and families (Samsonsen and Willumsen 2014). Parents in both countries emphasized power issues in assessments and the presence of very strong emotions. The experience of the parents seemed to go beyond national borders. First and foremost, they experienced strong emotions in a stressful situation: anxiety, frustration, and powerlessness, but also relief. In England, the set assessment process seemed to provide some clarity regarding system powers, but otherwise the parents reported mistrust towards social workers and a feeling of powerlessness. In Norway, the assessments were characterized in terms of professional judgement and more resources, which seemed to enable more helpful decisions from a family perspective. However, the heavy reliance on relationships using professional judgement was seen as informal power by the Norwegian parents (Samsonsen and Willumsen 2015). The role of professional judgment in assessments was analysed and discussed. A finding is that unfettered or unchallenged use of professional judgement is potentially as problematic as overreliance on protocols and procedures. Acknowledging issues in child protection as 'wicked problems' can help us own our uncertainties and focus on epistemic responsibilities in addition to accountability in the exercise of professional judgement in child protection assessments (Samsonsen and Turney 2016).

The overarching findings of the study were presented and discussed in the PhD thesis. What can we learn from each other to frame complex child protection issues, in terms of interventions sensitive to the particularities of unique situations but nonetheless reliable, robust, and accountable enough to handle the serious nature of the issues? One answer to this question is to continually strive for a constructive balance between structure and professional judgement, accompanied by resources to meet the identified need of the

families involved. Additionally, it seems important to focus on the content and process of professional judgement in order to support this key element of assessment. The families in this study stressed the emotional side of assessment, which is important to bear in mind when we discuss more technical aspects such as structures, models, and procedures. Assessments are carried out with real people in vulnerable situations and must therefore be handled with care (Samsonsens 2016).

## **Study 2**

Findings from this study were presented in three peer-reviewed scientific papers (Heggdalsvik 2020; Heggdalsvik and Samsonsens 2022; Heggdalsvik, Lorås, and Samsonsens 2022) and a forthcoming PhD thesis (Heggdalsvik 2023). The study's overarching research question was as follows: how do professionals in family counselling services and child welfare services understand and assess enduring parental high conflict? Given previous studies' claims that parental high conflict is difficult to assess (Jevne 2017; Rød 2012; Sudland 2020), the analysis in this study has focused on the mechanisms at play in the professional understanding and assessment of this phenomenon.

The findings in this study show there is overall concern among professionals in family counselling services and child welfare services for children involved in parental high conflict. Thus, not unexpectedly, it seems easier for professionals to express concern when asked about this in general terms than when asked about assessments in specific cases described in detail. Conditionally, the professionals are concerned not only about the children involved but also about how they as professionals in their services are to address the complexity of these conflicts. Given the study's findings, the authors claim that the complexity of parental high conflict exemplifies wicked problems. Professional assessments of these complex family situations challenge and extend epistemic measurements as well as one's exercise of professional judgment and accountability. In this way, the study indicates in general that professional discretion is exercised, which, by its very nature, is a source of tension, as well as the complexity involved in understanding and assessing the phenomenon of parental high conflict. The findings show that professionals find this type of conflict difficult and challenging, regardless of the professional service, jurisdiction, or mandate they are working in. Despite the findings that these professionals are generally concerned for children entangled in parental high conflict, it is evident that they are required to understand assessments in different jurisdictions, according to different mandates, and using different types of institutional logic (Heggdalsvik and Samsonsens 2022; Heggdalsvik, Lorås, and Samsonsens 2022).

Street-level bureaucracy is not straightforward (Lipsky 2010). Professionals dealing with family issues make normative judgements (Sayer 2017). Not only are they expected to understand what is at stake in a situation, they also need to have and use the ability to know when and how to take action. However, there is also potential to understand and discover the obstacles and mechanisms at play in the provision of assistance to a wide range of unique children and parents in terms of their needs in their family life.

When researching social work practices through the lens of critical realism, we analysed some commonalities in the two studies' findings. It seems to matter how social work problems are framed. Child and family issues can be understood as either 'tame' or 'wicked problems' in terms of complexity. A focus on risk and short-term outcomes



may be viewed as more fitting for a technical-rational response to the management of child abuse and family conflict (Featherstone, White, and Wastell 2012). A focus on needs and longer-term outcomes, however, moves away from the idea of a technical response and suggests understanding child and family problems as an altogether more complex issue that can be regarded as ‘wicked problems’ (Heggdalsvik, Lorås, and Samsonsen 2022; Samsonsen 2016). Since both studies have established that child and family issues in social work practice are complicated problems without no ‘quick fix’ solutions, a question arising in both studies was how to handle such problems. In the face of uncertainty and complexity, solutions must be creative, not narrow (Brown, Harris, and Russell 2010). This involves a shift away from technical responses in terms of specific social work methods for solving the problems towards more transdisciplinary approaches (Heggdalsvik, Lorås, and Samsonsen 2022; Samsonsen 2016). To further discuss how the critical realist perspective resonates in our findings, and how it was fruitful to take this critical realist perspective in these two studies in social work, we will begin by explaining the theories of wicked problems and transdisciplinarity.

### **Wicked problems theory in relation to child and family welfare**

Wicked problems theory was applied in both research projects. Wicked problems theory relates to problems that lack clear aims or solutions (Rittel and Webber 1973). From this perspective, such problems are understood as difficult due to their complex and interconnected nature. Wicked problems cannot be dealt with through the application of a system of enumeration phases to understand the problem and work out a clear solution. Given the dynamic social context within which wicked problems arise, one cannot understand such a problem without knowing its context, and there are no solutions in the sense of definitive and objective answers (Rittel and Webber 1973). Instead, possible solutions depend on how the problems are framed. Wicked problems are characterized by different world views and different frames for the involved stakeholders’ understanding of the problem. The constraints to which the problems are subject and the resources needed to solve them may change over time, for which reason the problems may never be definitively solved. Also characteristic of wicked problems is that they have complex interdependencies which may reveal or create new problems when one is trying to solve a given situation (Rittel and Webber 1973). Rather than follow fixed pathways to address wicked problems, inquirers and decision-makers need to explore a full range of research alternatives. Dealing with wicked problems also requires critical exploration and creative thinking (Brown, Harris, and Russell 2010). Devaney and Spratt (2009) have claimed that child abuse can be understood as wicked problems. It has also been claimed that parental high conflict is a wicked problems (Heggdalsvik, Lorås, and Samsonsen 2022).

### **Transdisciplinarity – understanding multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary contributions**

Brown, Harris, and Russell (2010) followed up on the understanding of wicked problems by emphasizing transdisciplinary as an important aspect of solving wicked problems. Transdisciplinary includes personal, local, strategic, and specialized contributions to

knowledge. It should be distinguished from multidisciplinary enquiry. Transdisciplinary goes beyond multidisciplinary to include validated constructions of knowledge, world-views, and methods of enquiry. In knowledge production, transdisciplinary research involves multiple players across multiple fields and disciplines (Andersen et al. 2020). The focus is on the organization of knowledge around complex heterogeneous domains rather than on the disciplines and subjects in which knowledge is commonly organized (Brown, Harris, and Russell 2010). Ramadier (2004) argues that complexity should be approached through transdisciplinarity, and further emphasizes the importance of researchers adopting the perspective of looking for coherence instead of paradox if a transdisciplinary approach is to be effective. In a transdisciplinary perspective, there is need for creative thinking and developing new ideas if one is to take a fresh look at phenomena from the outside (Brown, Harris, and Russell 2010). Critical realism can be described as 'intrinsically supportive of interdisciplinarity' (Bhaskar, Danermark, and Price 2018). Stigendal and Novy (2018) discuss how transdisciplinary collaboration can be encouraged by critical realism and how the notion of an equal partnership of researchers, practitioners and service users fits the critical realist perspective very well.

## Discussion

Two research studies have been offered as examples of the application of a critical realist perspective in social work research. An overarching question is why critical realism was considered fruitful in the exploration of complex child welfare issues. From our point of view, the normativity in social work is often under-communicated in the social sciences, resulting in research that takes an unclear value base as its starting point. Social work practice promotes social change and development, and by taking a critical point of view as a starting point for researching social problems, the focus shifts towards explaining the phenomena by revealing and discussing the mechanisms that produce and maintain them. This is crucial for counteracting the strong tendency to focus on the individual as the cause of their own social problems rather than on the complex mechanisms and structures in society that produce and exacerbate social problems. We will elaborate on these arguments in connection with the two research projects presented.

Why do we consider it so vital to have a clear value base as a starting point for social work research? Critical realism builds upon the assumption that reality is external and independent while also being socially and historically constructed (Kjørstad and Solem 2017). The value base in critical realist research is not neutral but of crucial importance, which fits very well with the normative starting point for the research carried out in Study 1 and Study 2 as presented. We are both experienced social workers with many years of practice in the child welfare system in Norway. A childhood characterized by the experience of violence and high level of conflict is, from our point of view, indisputably harmful and negative for a child. We have seen too much suffering amongst children to claim that reality does not exist: for children in these situations, their reality does exist. We are simply not willing as researchers to accept the notion that all 'truths' are equally accurate. For instance, Pocock (2015) claims that family therapy for long has recognized 'the both and' stance as a means of offering a safe container for holding the tension of the multiple perspectives of family members. He further argues that this 'both and' has its limits, since in practice we make choices between competing constructions (Pocock

2015). For us, the critical realist starting point that reality exist (for instance violence 'exists': someone is being beaten) does not challenge our objectivity as researchers but rather offers a transparent starting point for exploring the socially constructed reality and the mechanisms at play that influence the studied phenomenon. When moving from «reality» towards the human perception of reality, we acknowledge the different perspectives on reality, but we remain firm about the starting point of what actually happens.

We previously claimed that taking a critical point of view as a starting point for researching social problems shifts the focus towards explaining phenomena by revealing and discussing the mechanisms that produce and maintain them. What do we mean by that? And how has this been applied in our two studies on child welfare? In social work theory, we find different perspectives on social problems, one of which is critical theory, which focuses on structural rather than personal or interpersonal explanations for social problems and is influenced by a Marxist emphasis on power and class (Payne 2020). A critical perspective on social work practice is very resonant with a critical realist approach to researching social problems.

In our research projects (Study 1 and Study 2), our starting point was critical points of view on practice methods. These critical points were influenced by our clinical experience of child protection assessment and handling parental high conflict as professionals. We began the process of reflection by questioning whether the existing approaches and methods in Norway target the researched problems sufficiently. Our main question was what hinders and what promotes good practice in child protection assessment and the handling of high parental conflict in terms of structure and mechanisms at play. In study 1, a critical starting point was why Norway's rather narrow assessment practice was not contested or challenged by more western international assessment practices. When we look beyond our familiar context, we can see new perspectives. While we were being educated as social workers – and later, while practising as social workers – there was no discussion of different assessment methods. Stumbling upon literature that discussed the role of risk assessment versus professional judgement in assessment roused our curiosity. Since different stakeholders will have different perspectives on, and interests in, phenomena such as child protection assessment, interviews were conducted with parents who had experience of such assessments, and with social workers. One contribution of the critical realist perspective is its practical orientation: what works for whom in what circumstances? When asked for their opinion of the two types of assessment practice (i.e. in Norway and in England), the parents in both countries had more to say about feelings than about the framework and procedures. Assessments are dual in nature, representing both help and control, and parents may wonder whether the social worker is friend or foe. This can give rise to emotions such as despair, and anger, and draws attention to power issues being both systemic and relational. The main finding from the social worker perspective showed that social workers in Norway and England experienced differences in the degree of structure and professional judgment within their respective assessment frameworks. The findings illustrate the two contexts' distinctive characteristics in terms of assessment practice and policy context, which underpin the different mechanisms at play in different contexts (Samsonsen 2016).

The critical starting point in Study 2 was the impression that the number of cases where children are reported to be involved in parental high conflict is growing. In parallel, there was more frequent discussion of the services where these types of cases belonged.

This raised question of what professionals expected children to handle in these types of situations. The child's right to protection versus the family's right to privacy presented a challenge to the professionals in the different services. Another central question was whether professionals understood and assessed a child's care situation from a risk-oriented or a resilience-oriented perspective. In Study 2, mechanisms at play that were identified included the different mandates given to the three specialist services dealing with parental high conflict in Norway: family counselling services, child welfare services and the district court. Even though the phenomenon is the same, as a consequence of law, mandates, and institutional logics, children may end up with insufficient assistance, as there is a risk of a revolving door effect (Saini et al. 2012). Professionals struggle to be able to take the necessary measures within their services, and families may be involved with all three services at the same time, even as a conflict continue and continue to affect their children (Heggdalsvik, Lorås, and Samsonsen 2022).

A critical point in both studies led to the question of what is to be done if no one simple method for professionals is suitable for addressing current issues. Could it be that we should reduce the complexity involved in our efforts to understanding and assess family life in our eagerness to find *the* correct solution? By focusing on needs and longer-term outcomes, it is possible to move away from the idea of a technical response in terms of single methods or frameworks for solving complex issues in social work, suggesting instead an understanding of family matters more in terms of wicked problems (Devaney and Spratt 2009; Rittel and Webber 1973). Given the acceptance of the notion of child welfare issues as wicked problems, the rationale for procedural responses in situations of uncertainty becomes less certain, and it becomes even more important to develop ways to navigate the space for professional judgment and transdisciplinary cooperation. Social workers who face complex tasks such as child protection assessments and helping children living with parental high conflict, are in need of proper systemic support, such as manageable caseloads, reflective supervision, and public trust. Rather than address such issues by developing technical methods, a focus on the mechanisms at play in different contexts, in combination with critical reflection on the limitations to the system's approach to addressing these challenging situations, may bring about important practical change and consequently a better equalization of power between the system and 'the people', and more creative and tailor-made transdisciplinary approaches.

## Implications

Norway is a well-developed welfare state with high levels of income tax and income redistribution through the welfare services. Despite these resources, our studies show that professionals struggle within their respective services when they need to deal with complex family issues, which is in line with the findings in the international research literature. By recognizing complexity and focusing on the mechanisms at work around these professionals, we argue that the answers and solutions cannot be one-dimensional and follow the same kind of enumeration phases that are effective for 'tamer' and more technical problems. Thorough analysis in both of our research projects pointed towards transdisciplinarity as an exciting and broadening perspective on such complex issues in social work. Our reflections ended up being consistent with critical realism's emphasis

on the value of a structural analysis of problems and challenges. One might argue that there is nothing new and revolutionary about our thoughts and reflections, and while we would agree with this in general, our studies showed that in everyday situations it may be difficult for professional social workers to adopt a long-term perspective and see beyond their mandates and specific contexts. As Houston and Montgomery (2017) argue: 'A barrier for social work is that philosophy can be viewed as an arcane subject: one that is difficult to apply in practical, real-life circumstances'. Our argument is that a critical focus on social work practice and the mechanisms at play in shaping practice is not difficult but indeed applicable to real-life circumstances.

Not only is transdisciplinarity as a perspective important when studying practice, it also introduces considerations that are fruitful in the planning and conduct of new research projects. From a transdisciplinary perspective, it is possible for researchers to design and to be involved in creative co-production thinking. In this manner, researchers can challenge and build upon phenomenological practice gaps and focus on epistemic fallacy as a way of contributing to knowledge building.

## Conclusion

Our conclusion is consistent with the claim of Houston and Montgomery (2017) that social workers carry out in their practice in a world of ever-increasing complexity and oppression. Child and family welfare issues, which are the focus of our two separate studies, always have existed and continue to exist. It is therefore naive to believe that abuse and conflict will not result in children's maladjustments in the future. Therefore, we argue that it is of vital importance to have a clear and visible value base that recognizes children's reality and does not treat that as a negotiable starting point. It is also of vital importance to approach these issues as the responsibility of society as a whole and not as the problems of individuals. Researchers need to bring a critical starting point to the table to a far greater extent in order to produce knowledge that contributes to a better situation for children who live with abuse and parental conflict. As societies and contextual frameworks changes, we need to be prepared to handle such problems and challenges in fresh guises and within changing arenas. In accordance with a critical realist perspective, we need to be open to and curious about new perspectives and alternative ways of dealing with such issues however and wherever they appear.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributors

*Vibeke Samsonsen* teaches and researches at the Institute for Welfare and Participation at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. She has a PhD in social work.

*Inger Kristin Heggdalsvik* teaches and researches at the Institute for Welfare and Participation at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. She has an MA in social work and is pursuing her PhD in social work.

## ORCID

Vibeke Samsonsens  <http://orcid.org/0009-0009-8540-789X>

Inger Kristin Heggdalsvik  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7264-4257>

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