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[SPEAKER_03]

Children may be temporarily removed from the care of their birth parents by Child Protection Services if this is in the best interest of the child. Ideally, their birth parents, with the support of the Child Protection Services, will be eventually able to resume care and the family will be reunited.

So in an ideal world, what does reunification actually mean?

In theory at least, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, reunification can be defined as a planned process of safely returning and enabling a child to remain at home with their birth parents after a period of care.

This should be done if and when it is in the best interests of the child to do so.

The long-term goal is to safeguard the child's feelings of long-term stability and feelings of belonging.

But reunification is not a single event, it is a process.

It's a journey involving a preparation phase when social workers might work with the child and the parent to maintain or rebuild damaged relationships between them.

It also involves a transition phase when the child is being reintegrated back into the home and then a post-reunification phase when families are supported as they adjust to each other again.

But this is a complex journey full of challenges and dilemmas at all points of the journey.

In this podcast, we hear from Lisa Rusal.

a social worker at Child Protection Services in Norway.

She is also a PhD fellow here at the University of Stavanger and she has chosen the difficult subject of reunification as the subject of her PhD studies.

We discussed together the challenges she faced as a social worker working with the reunification process and we explore why we need innovation in this area and the very small part her PhD study will contribute to this field.

[SPEAKER_00]

Du skal nå få lytte på en episode av Kafé Social, produsert av Institutt for Sosialfag med Universitetet i Stavanger.

Og mitt navn er Wenke Hovland.

[SPEAKER_03]

And my name is Sarah Hean and you're about to listen to an episode of the Kafé Social podcast series produced by the Institute of Social Work at the University of Stavanger.

Welcome, Lisa.

Very nice having you here.

Just for the listeners or the listener, Lisa, I'm Lisa's supervisor on her PhD project here at the university.

So you are very welcome, Lisa.

You've been with us since May.

So it's been really interesting, really good working with you over the last few months.

But maybe to share with people, you know, perhaps introduce yourself, who you

are and why you chose to study this really difficult subject.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yes.

I am a social pedagog.

And I have...

I have worked as a social worker in Sandnes for ten years.

I started there when I was finished in 2013, so I started as a social worker and also had a little time as a specialist before I started here at UiS in May,

and this interest for this PhD program, it came actually from that I took a master's degree in social sciences, which I delivered in 2022, where I looked at how Norway expressed itself after this Strand-Lobben case that came in 2019, and how it has affected society.

[SPEAKER_03]

And also just to say what's been really interesting about this particular study is that you have your position here as a PhD student, but you also retain a percentage position at Barnevern.

And actually that's been so wonderful because it's made the project so much more applicable and practice relevant.

But you were talking about the Strand-Lobben case and the rulings that came down from the European Court.

Could you say a little bit about those rulings and what the implications for the reunification process might have been?

[SPEAKER_01]

The main point of the Strand-Lobben trial, as I have understood it, is that Norwegian authorities have worked out an assumption that the placement is long-term, and they have followed up the mother and the child in this case, in a way that suggests that this child will grow up in foster homes.

But the main problem there was that it was not documented enough.

Why did the parents consider this as a long-term placement?

And why did one come to the conclusion that the adoption of this child was right?

And thus one thought that ...that the Norwegian authorities had violated the mother and child's right to family life, i.e. the EMD article 8.

[SPEAKER_03]

So there's something interesting about, as you say, it's such a complex area, but I suppose, as you said, in an ideal world, if everything is perfect, that when a child is...is removed from from from a birth family that reunification would always be a goal and and I think the the European law or the European courts are pushing for a greater emphasis on reunification but that's quite a simplistic view I think because talking to you over the last six months it's much more complex than that and there's so many dilemmas and challenges to the so-called reunification journey or the goal if it should be a goal of reuniting the child and the birth family. So what are some of the challenges that you think that you personally as a social worker experienced during this very difficult kind of goal that you want to question?

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah.. I have seen a big shift since about 2022, from when the Strand Lobbendommen came...

From considering placements as long-term already...we have come to the conclusion that placements are entirely medium-term, and that reunification is the overarching goal.

It is a difficult goal to maintain or to work towards, because different stakeholders have different perceptions

It is a job that requires parents and social workers who are on the same wavelength and who trust each other.

That there is a close and good relationship so that they can work together in a good way.

[SPEAKER_03]

I'm glad you mentioned the relationship with the parent because although there are many, many factors that impact whether a reunification process is possible or actually if it happens or if it's an effective one, you've pointed out very nicely the focus that I think your project begins to focus on.

So we've had some discussions

very good conversations in our supervision sessions, exploring the literature together or the limited literature together.

And we found that the evidence suggests that one of the many factors, one of the central factors for an effective unification process or

at least an effective process, whether reunification happens or not, is the quality of the cooperation between the birth parent and the child protection services, as you mentioned.

So in your personal experience as a social worker, and you're thinking about how social workers work with parents or with the birth parents after the child has been taken away,

What are your personal experiences of that particular relationship and what challenges it brings?

Because it's so important to the reunification process goal eventually.

[SPEAKER_01]

Don't think there is enough focus on the crisis that parents go through. The crisis is that they lose their children and then must fight against a large system that is much bigger than them. The process that is very shameful for these parents. There are expectations from the system, there are expectations from society, they have expectations of themselves based on this. The loss of their children to the public system, is in many ways what other parents can go through by losing their children to illness or death. But it is not a loss that is recognized as legitimate by society

[SPEAKER_03]

We've had a lot of conversations about how you can collaborate better with parents and actually we often bandy the words around about co-produce with parents and that kind of assumes that social workers and parents need to be a team or be seen as a team rather than a social worker helping or supporting a parent.

So it leads to, and actually if we are going to look at the relationship with parents, between the parent and a social worker as a team exercise, as a co-productive exercise, there's so many of...

the criteria that's required for an effective co-production process that are not in place.

So you're talking about, you know, quite severe lack of trust between the, that the parent is not going to be trusting the social worker, that they power differentials between the parent and the social worker, that the social worker and the parent may not trust

It may not share a common goal, and these are all factors that we know work against reunification.

So, Lisa, I think in our earlier conversation, you were talking about the very severe time pressures that social workers experience during this reunification process.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yes, it has always been a big and demanding task for us as social workers in the child welfare system, but it has...I would say, increased over time. There are many and complex work social worker are supposed to perform during their working days, which means that they do not have all the time they would want to be able to invest in the people they are in contact with.

It is of course the children who are at the center about parents have a legal right to be followed up in a systematic way after the children are placed in foster care or when it comes to voluntary placement.

But one thing I see is that this has been a problem over time, that social workers can't follow up

parents, in a good enough way. And there have been various reasons for this. But what is striking is that it is low priority to follow up the parents.

That the focus is elsewhere.

That it is because of difficult parent-social worker relationships.

They can't get in touch with the parents.

They can't achieve a good enough contact with them.

And that...

If the parents don't want to, then it stops a bit.

I'm afraid that this time lapse is helping the parents stagnate when there is so much else to take care of.

[SPEAKER_03]

Absolutely.

You were also talking to us about, which I quite like the word, you talked about being a double agent and the kind of double agent role of a social worker, which I know is probably related to the trust in the parent relationship.

But can you say a little bit about what you meant by double agent?

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, absolutely. I'm talking about having a double role. Social workers have taken away the children from the parent. But afterwards will come in as a support apparatus. The fact that social workers have this double role: the one who imposes the court order removing the child on the parents, and at the same time be the one who helps them to get the children back. It will create big trust problems and contribute to conflict, where the parents have a hard time trusting the social worker

Through my project, I hope that we can increase the understanding of how the parents experience the reunification process.

[SPEAKER_03]

It really points to the real complexity of this parent-social worker relationship that your project will be unpacking. But also what I really wanted to pick up on, which is so central to your PhD project, is this idea of recognition. So I wonder if you could say a little bit about recognition by the social worker... about the fundamental needs for the parent to be recognized in various spheres.... the focus of your your phd trying to understand a little bit better about parents experiences of recognition

[SPEAKER_01]

What I hope to achieve in this project is to explore how parents are recognized by social workers or how parents experience being recognized. I think that the goal, or what I hope to achieve with my project, is to increase an understanding of how parents are recognized, or feel that they are recognized when they meet social workers from Barnevern

Recognition revolves around these three things, the spheres, as we say in Norwegian.

In order to achieve recognition, it has to happen in these three different areas or spheres, both with how a parent can be recognized as an important person for their children, that they get recognition for their needs, for their feelings as a person, as a parent who no longer has children and children with them.

It's first in the private sphere. And then there is also recognition in the legal area. That we recognize them as individuals who have the right to live together with their children, that they have the same rights as others for this, and this is something that, when we then take away this right, .. The Third is about solidarity and what they can offer society in terms of being a parent.

But there is a pretty big power gap between the parent and the child welfare services. We want to lift the parents up and make them more Equal. We want them participating more, more independent---I want to explore how parents experience recognition when they meet Barnevern so collaboration between Them is better so that the children can move home quicker and better.

[SPEAKER_03]

we're reaching the end of our podcast, but to sort of position this in relation to innovation in this area.... what I think is really interesting about your project is that we focus on recognition, and how it's experienced by parents. Understanding this a little better, will enable us to develop interventions that allow that recognition to happen. And I think what's really interesting Sandnes Barnevern where you're working is that you already have tools that could potentially be used as Tools that could act as Tools of recognition---they just simply haven't been labeled as such. So for example we were talking about the På Gulvet intervention: we're talking about recognition and you were talking about the the solidarity sphere. The solidarity sphere is actually one possible interpretation of that is that parents need to be able to to make a contribution as a parent, they need to feel like they're still parenting the child, even though they're not in the same house as them. So even though they're physically separated, they need to be able to still be a mother, still be a father. And I think certain innovations, such as På Gulvet, for example, would be a perfect way of allowing the parent to receive recognition

that they can actually work with their child. So instead of meeting at McDonald's for a cup of coffee---how are you being a parent if you're meeting your child once a year for a cup of coffee at McDonald's?--But if you're working in a way that you are allowed to be a parent, and you can parent even though you're not you're not physically with your child provides that recognition- So i think your your your project is super super interesting and i'm looking forward to working with you more about it

In this podcast, we have heard about how complex and unpredictable this process actually is in reality, full of uncertainty, challenges and dilemmas for all those concerned.

We hear from Lisa how a step in addressing these issues may lay in the relationship between the social worker and the birth parent, and how building mutual trust and respect between them is essential if the likelihood of an effective reunification is to be achieved.

Lisa talks to us about how getting a better understanding of how parents feel recognised by child protection services and social workers in the various dimensions of their lives is so important, and especially how they may be experiencing love from their child, how they exercise their rights to be a carer for their child,

and how they are eventually able to practice being a parent, even when physically separated from the child.

All of these issues require a lot of innovation and services in the future, but a PhD project will contribute to a small understanding of what recognition looks like so that this innovation can take place.

[SPEAKER_00]

You have now listened to an episode from the podcast series Kafé Social, a series made by the Institute for Social Studies at the University of Stavanger. And my name is Wenke Hovland.

[SPEAKER_03]

And my name is Sarah Hean.

And you have just finished listening to an episode of the Café Social podcast series produced by the Institute of Social Work at the University of Stavanger.