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**Cultural and ethnic diversity in the child welfare system:
 a qualitative study on the experiences and perspectives of
 professionals in the province of Groningen**

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Abstract

In the Netherlands, children, youth and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups form an increasing proportion of the client population in the child welfare system. This trend is also observed in the province of Groningen, a region where relatively most child and youth care is provided. As a consequence, child welfare professionals are increasingly faced with cultural and ethnic diversity in their work. However, little is known about how they themselves are experiencing and perceiving this in their daily work. To provide more and renewed insight into this, the research question that is central to this study is: “How do child welfare professionals in the province of Groningen who are in direct contact with children and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups experience, perceive and work with cultural and ethnic diversity in practice?”. The concepts of disproportionality and disparity, cultural competence and intersectionality, which prevail in international literature on cultural and ethnic diversity in the child welfare system, are used in exploring this. An exploratory and qualitative study has been conducted. Nine professionals who are working in the child welfare system in the province of Groningen were interviewed. The findings demonstrate that cultural and ethnic diversity is an important and recurring theme in the daily work of professionals. In addition, these show how professionals encounter the concepts of disproportionality and disparity, cultural competence and intersectionality in practice.

Samenvatting

In Nederland vormen kinderen, jongeren en gezinnen uit gemarginaliseerde culturele of etnische minderheden een toenemend aandeel van de cliënten in de jeugdzorg. Deze trend wordt ook waargenomen in de provincie Groningen, een regio waar relatief de meeste jeugdzorg wordt gegeven. Als gevolg hiervan, krijgen jeugdzorgprofessionals steeds vaker te maken met culturele en etnische diversiteit in hun werk. Er is echter weinig bekend over hoe zij dit zelf ervaren en verstaan. Om hier meer en hernieuwd inzicht in te krijgen, staat de volgende onderzoeksvraag centraal in dit onderzoek: “Hoe ervaren en verstaan jeugdzorgprofessionals in de provincie Groningen die in direct contact staan met kinderen en gezinnen uit gemarginaliseerde culturele of etnische minderheden culturele en etnische diversiteit in de praktijk? Om dit te onderzoeken, worden de concepten onevenredigheid en ongelijkheid, culturele competentie en intersectionaliteit, die naar voren komen in internationale literatuur over culturele en etnische diversiteit in jeugdzorg, gebruikt. Het onderzoek dat is uitgevoerd, is verkennend en kwalitatief van aard. Er zijn negen professionals geïnterviewd die werkzaam zijn in de jeugdzorg binnen de provincie Groningen. De resultaten tonen aan dat culturele en etnische diversiteit een belangrijk en terugkerend thema is in het dagelijks werk van professionals en laten zien hoe professionals in de praktijk te maken hebben met de concepten onevenredigheid en ongelijkheid, culturele competentie en intersectionaliteit.

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1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, children, youth and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups form an increasing proportion of the client population in the child welfare system (Bouteh & De Haan, 2019; Kromhout et al., 2000). The Dutch child welfare system, which is also referred to as the child and youth care system, includes child and youth support with regard to intellectual, psychological and parenting problems, child and youth protection, and juvenile justice or rehabilitation (Grietens, 2014; Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2019). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), nearly 88 thousand cultural or ethnic minority children and youth were involved in the system in 2015, compared to 113 thousand in 2020. These numbers correspond to an increase in the proportion of cultural or ethnic minorities from 23% to 26% of the total client population during these five years (CBS, 2022). When considering the components of the Dutch child welfare system in isolation, this is mainly caused by an increase in both the absolute number and the proportion of cultural or ethnic minority children and youth receiving child or youth support, which rose from 80 thousand to 108 thousand and from 22% to 25% of the total client population receiving support between 2015 and 2020, respectively. Within the Northern province of Groningen, a region where relatively most child and youth care is provided, similar developments and increases occurred during this period.

As a consequence of this recent increase in culturally or ethnically minoritised clients, child welfare professionals are increasingly faced with cultural and ethnic diversity in their daily work, which poses unique challenges. According to Vedder and Van Geel (2017), two reasons to pay particular attention to children, youth and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups in the child welfare system are the particularities in development and upbringing that are specific to children and youth from certain minoritised groups, and the desirability to adapt contact with and services for children, youth and families from minoritised groups to their living conditions, beliefs, customs, norms and values. In line with this, the Dutch Child and Youth Act requires professionals to take into account the characteristics and needs, but also the cultural background and religious affiliation of children, youth and their parents when determining and implementing child welfare services (Jeugdwet, 2014). Furthermore, there is an abundance of literature that describes guidelines and methods for professionals who work with children, youth and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups in child welfare (e.g. National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2015; Pels et al., 2009; Richtlijnen jeugdhulp en jeugdbescherming, 2021; Van de Haterd et al., 2010).

However, studies that highlight the experiences of culturally or ethnically minoritised groups show that the connection between the child welfare system and these minoritised groups in the Netherlands leaves much to be desired. First, several authors found that both accessibility and quality of child welfare services are not optimal yet for children, youth and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups (Bellaart & Pehlivan, 2011; Day et al., 2016; Grietens, 2014). They do not recognise themselves in child welfare services, because the approaches and methods used do not match them and the workforce of child welfare professionals lacks diversity as well as intercultural knowledge and skills. Day et al. (2016) attribute this to a lack of diversity sensitivity on the part of child welfare organisations. They state that within these organisations, attention to cultural and ethnic diversity is mainly project-based instead of structurally embedded in organisational cultures and policies. Second, some parents from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups have feelings of fear and mistrust towards the child welfare system. These feelings can arise from negative experiences that they have had with the child welfare system or can be related to certain perceptions that they have of its services, such as that their background will not be taken into account and that the ways in which they want to raise their children will be rejected or not be respected (Bellaart & Pehlivan, 2011; Distelbrink et al., 2010; Gilsing et al., 2015; Kalthoff, 2009). In addition, among some parents, the thought prevails that if they do not raise their children according to Dutch standards, the child welfare system will take their children away (Van den Broek et al., 2010). Although several authors attribute these feelings and perceptions to the fact that children, youth and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups are mainly confronted with compulsory forms of child and youth support (Gilsing et al., 2015; Van den Broek et al., 2010), Verhulp et al. (2018) argue that their minoritised position and associated possible experiences of discrimination and racism also play a role in parents' feelings and perceptions towards the child welfare system.

Despite the growing demand for child welfare professionals to pay attention to culturally or ethnically minoritised groups and associated cultural and ethnic diversity, little is known about how they themselves are experiencing and perceiving this in their daily work. In the Netherlands, the experiences and perspectives of child welfare professionals have first been addressed in studies by Bellaart and Azrar (2002) and Oude Breuil (2005), who found that they perceive difficulties in communicating with and reaching immigrant children, youth and parents (as cited in Grietens, 2014). Other authors have confirmed these findings. From interviews that Bellaart et al. (2016) have conducted with professionals, it appears that they experience time restrictions with regard to providing explanations and dispelling mistrust among immigrant clients and that due to a lack of diversity among the workforce, support in the native

language of immigrant clients is dependent on the coincidental availability of a professional who masters the language. Moreover, Van de Haterd et al. (2010) have found that professionals perceive barriers to employing external interpreters. In addition, a recent study into what is needed to embed diversity sensitivity within child welfare organisations in the Netherlands has revealed difficulties other than these struggles related to communication and reach (Bellaart et al., 2021). For example, professionals explained that a lack of diversity among the workforce also hampers both exchange of knowledge and matching between immigrant clients and professionals, competences to connect with and to match the living conditions, norms and values of immigrant clients are insufficient and collaboration between child welfare organisations and informal networks or migrant organisations is rare. Therefore, the authors concluded that diversity sensitivity is considered important by professionals in the child welfare system, but is currently not given enough priority. This is due to limited financial and time resources as well as changes and transitions in the child welfare system.

As professionals accumulate knowledge about both clients and shortcomings of the child welfare system in practice, they are in a unique position to analyse and influence child welfare organisations and the system as a whole (Anis & Turtiainen, 2021; Eliassi, 2017). Their insights and knowledge with regard to cultural and ethnic diversity can thus contribute to improve the work with culturally or ethnically minoritised clients. Therefore, the aim of this exploratory study is to gain more and renewed insight into the experiences and perspectives of child welfare professionals in the Netherlands, specifically child welfare professionals in the province of Groningen, with regard to cultural and ethnic diversity in their daily work. This is especially important in the light of several relevant developments that have taken place since 2015, namely the high levels of migration to Europe during the ‘European refugee crisis’ (Alisic & Letschert, 2016), the increase in the proportion of children, youth and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups in the Dutch child welfare system (CBS, 2022) and the changes in the child welfare system as a consequence of the introduction of the Child and Youth Act in the Netherlands (López López et al., 2019). Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing literature on cultural and ethnic diversity in the Dutch child welfare system by focusing on three important concepts or themes that prevail in international literature, which are disproportionality and disparity, cultural competence and intersectionality. However, as these concepts are mainly theoretical descriptions, they do not necessarily capture the reality and the work of child welfare professionals (Volkmar-Eeg & Enoksen 2020). Therefore, this study provides insight into how professionals understand the concepts, but also into the applicability of the concepts in child welfare practice.

The research question that is central to this study is ‘How do child welfare professionals in the province of Groningen who are in direct contact with children and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups experience, perceive and work with cultural and ethnic diversity in practice?’. In order to answer this question, several sub questions about culture, ethnicity and the three concepts or themes from international literature on cultural and ethnic diversity in the child welfare system will be addressed: a) ‘What do culture, ethnicity and culturally or ethnically minoritised groups mean to professionals?’; b) ‘How do professionals perceive working with children and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups compared to those from culturally or ethnically advantaged groups?’; c) ‘How do professionals understand and translate cultural competence into practice?’; d) ‘In what ways do professionals take into account categories of identity other than ethnicity or race and dynamics of power when working with children and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups?’.

This thesis is structured as follows. First, the theoretical exploration clarifies the terms ‘cultural and ethnic diversity’ and ‘culturally or ethnically minoritised groups’, and explains the concepts of disproportionality and disparity, cultural competence and intersectionality. This is followed by the research methodology, which describes the research design, participants and recruitment, instrument and data collection, data analysis as well as ethical considerations. Next, the findings are presented. Based on these findings, the conclusion formulates an answer to the research question. Finally, the discussion reflects on the findings, states the strengths and limitations of the study and provides recommendations for practice as well as further research.

2. Theoretical exploration

2.1 Cultural and ethnic diversity

Brah (1996) argues that how concepts of difference and diversity are constructed is dependent on discourses of ethnicity, nationalism and racism among other things. For example, in race-conscious societies such as Canada and the United States, racial differences are the main criterion for distinguishing between groups and therefore, issues related to diversity are often formulated in terms of discrimination and racism. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, the focus is much more on cultural differences and cultural diversity (Eldering, 2010). However, according to Marsiglia et al. (2021), cultural diversity is not an easy concept to define, because there is no consensus about which differences and groups actually contribute diversity to a community or society. As a consequence of this lack of consensus, “there is a risk of approaching cultural diversity from an overly broad or an overly narrow perspective” (p. 29). The authors state that when using the term ‘cultural diversity’, as opposed to a more specific term such as ‘ethnic or racial diversity’, there is a risk of overlooking issues related to inequality and unequal treatment of ethnic and racial minoritised groups. A disadvantage of the term ‘ethnic or racial diversity’, in contrast, is that it is solely based on ethnic or racial differences and thus may exclude other oppressed or non-dominant groups.

The concepts of culture, ethnicity and race are closely related and have profound implications for child welfare professionals. Nevertheless, Leininger and McFarland (2002) distinguish culture as “the learned, shared and transmitted knowledge of values, beliefs and lifeways of a particular group that are generally transmitted intergenerationally and influence thinking, decisions and actions in certain or patterned ways” (as cited in Laird & Tendam, 2019, p. 10). In addition, the authors contend that culture is commonly unconscious and its beliefs and values express the ideal rather than the reality. This is in line with how Marsiglia et al. (2021) define culture, namely both as a constellation of shared ideas and values and of how people interpret the world around them, and as a guide to how people are expected to behave and think in their community or society. Second, the concept of ethnicity is about identification with people who have a similar culture, historical roots, language and religion among other things, which implies a common history or origin as well as shared cultural beliefs and values (Laird & Tendam, 2019). Although the idea of a shared culture is thus closely associated with belonging to and identifying with an ethnic group, this is not directly related. Furthermore, ethnicity does not only concern how people identify or see themselves as members of an ethnic group, but also how they are categorised or seen by others. This corresponds to what

Laird and Tadam (2019) and Marsiglia et al. (2021) understand by the concept of race. Both argue that race is a social construct rather than inherent biological variation between people. Differences among people in skin colour, height, hair texture, eye shape and other physical characteristics lead to assumptions about other people's attributes and abilities. As a consequence, "people are categorised into groups on the basis of beliefs about their common biological descent and assumed psychological, emotional and behavioural characteristics" (Laird & Tadam, 2019, p. 9). Sawrikar (2017) explicitly confirms this association between ethnicity and race by stating that race is one of the dimensions of ethnicity.

To emphasise the overlap between the concepts of culture, ethnicity and race as well as to avoid an overly broad or an overly narrow interpretation of the concept of cultural diversity, the term 'cultural and ethnic diversity' is used in this study. In this way, room is left for multiple differences and groups that can possibly contribute diversity to a community or society.

2.2 Culturally or ethnically minoritised groups

In the Netherlands, research and policy apply descriptive terms such as 'cultural or ethnic minorities', 'migration background' and 'immigrants', which are defined as people who have migrated to the Netherlands themselves or people of whom at least one parent has migrated to the Netherlands (Bellaart et al., 2016; CBS, 2022; Grietens, 2014; Vedder & Van Geel, 2017). However, the term 'minorities' is controversial, both in its accuracy and its implications for power relations. Although this term is nowadays used to denote unequal power relations instead of unequal numbers or size, it creates the illusion that marginalisation and oppression of certain cultural or ethnic groups is associated with their lack of size in a community or society. The term 'minorities' thus naturalises or perpetuates, rather than challenges, unequal power relations by implying that these groups are exceptions and out of the mainstream (Brah, 1996; Marsiglia et al., 2021). Furthermore, the terms 'migration background' and 'immigrants' are likewise problematic, because these conceal diversity between different cultures and ethnicities (Dominelli, 2018). In addition, these terms do not take into account power relations, as migrants do not necessarily face discrimination or oppression, such as White migrants, while people from certain cultural or ethnic groups who have lived in a community or society for generations can also or still experience marginalisation and oppression, such as Black people (Middel et al., 2020).

Another term that appears in international literature is 'minoritised groups'. As opposed to the term 'minorities', this term implies that people from certain cultural or ethnic groups are actively minoritised by others, rather than naturally exist as minorities, and thus includes power relations and the social processes related to discrimination, domination and oppression

(Gunaratnam, 2003; Milner & Jumbe, 2020). Therefore, the term ‘minoritised groups’ also adds more nuance than the term ‘marginalised groups’. Along these lines, Selvarajah et al. (2020) define ‘minoritised groups’ as “individuals and populations, including numerical majorities, whose collective cultural, economic, political and social power has been eroded (...) in active processes that sustain structures of domination” (p. 3).

Throughout this study, the term ‘culturally or ethnically minoritised groups’ is used. This term both emphasises power relations and the social processes related to discrimination, domination and oppression, and highlights diversity and heterogeneity between different cultural or ethnic groups.

2.3 Disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system

In the context of the child welfare system, disproportionality and disparity are often mentioned together and treated as synonymous. However, the concepts and phenomena carry distinct implications. Disproportionality refers to overrepresentation or underrepresentation of different ethnic and racial groups in the child welfare system (King et al., 2017). This is measured as “the ratio of the percentage of people of a certain ethnicity or race in a target population to the percentage of people of the same group in a reference population” (Fluke et al., 2010, p. 8). Disparity, on the other hand, means unequal treatment of different ethnic and racial groups in terms of decision-making, delivery of services or outcomes and is measured as “the comparison of the ratio of one ethnic group or race in an event to the representation of another ethnic group or race who experienced the same event” (Fluke et al., 2010, p. 8). Nevertheless, the phenomena of disproportionality and disparity are possibly related. Dettlaff et al. (2020) argue that disproportionality exists because of disparities that occur along the child welfare continuum, which impact both entries into the system and exits from the system. In this way, disparity within the system can influence and increase the likelihood of disproportionality.

2.3.1 Occurrence and implications

The phenomena of disproportionality and disparity challenge the core values of an equitable and fair child welfare system (Feely & Bosk, 2021). Numerous studies across different parts of the world have shown that these phenomena persist as a feature of the system, as child welfare involvement disproportionately affects culturally or ethnically minoritised groups and child welfare services are more intrusive and punitive towards these groups. For example, in Canada, the United States and Australia, children, youth and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups, especially Black, indigenous and Latinx people,

are more likely to be notified or reported to child welfare authorities, to be investigated, to have reports substantiated, to be transferred to ongoing services and to be placed into foster or other out-of-home care, and they usually remain in care for longer periods than White children (Children’s Bureau, 2019; Kim et al., 2017; Lavergne et al., 2008; Maguire-Jack et al., 2020; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016; Sinha et al., 2011; Tilbury, 2009). Furthermore, Merritt (2021) has found that in the United States, disproportionate involvement in and surveillance by the system has deleterious effects on Black and Latinx parents. This can result in tense parent-child relationships, suboptimal parental functioning and poor emotional well-being, which “transfers intergenerationally to children and affects their coping mechanisms and healthy development” (p. 69). In addition, Dettlaff et al. (2020) state that disproportionality and disparity result in cognitive and developmental delays, behavioural problems, depression and poor educational achievement among Black children. They even argue that because of the persistent and pervasive nature of these phenomena and the inability of the system to adequately address them, the child welfare system in the United States should be abolished and child, youth and family safety and well-being should be reimagined.

Although most of the literature on disproportionality and disparity originates from Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, differences in child welfare involvement by ethnicity and race also exist in the Netherlands. For example, Antillean and Surinamese children and youth are overrepresented in all types of child welfare services, whereas Moroccan, Turkish and other culturally or ethnically minoritised children and youth are underrepresented in milder types of services, but overrepresented in severe types of services (Gilsing et al., 2015). Moreover, the United Nations (2018) are concerned over bias and racism in the Dutch child welfare system, noting that “there are disparities in how the child welfare system treats Dutch families compared to those of African descent.”

2.3.2 Underlying factors and dynamics

There is a variety of factors that can contribute to disproportionality and disparity, but it is difficult to determine what particular aspects at either the system or child and family level have an effect and to what extent (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). According to Feely and Bosk (2021), two conflicting and prominent explanations are the ‘bias explanation’ and the ‘differential need or risk explanation’. The ‘bias explanation’ assumes that the child welfare system is prejudiced against certain ethnic and racial groups. It contends that there is a similar amount of maltreatment and intellectual, psychological and parenting problems across all children and families, but that because of bias and racism, certain groups

are both involved in the child welfare system at higher rates and treated differently. This bias and racism occur among child welfare professionals, result from policies and practices within child welfare organisations or the system as a whole, or both (Fluke et al., 2010). In contrast, the ‘differential risk explanation’ argues that disproportionality and disparity reflect underlying differences in the amount of maltreatment and problems among ethnic and racial groups. It contends that disproportionality and disparity are the result of differences in exposure to risk factors and focuses on vulnerability of certain groups in terms of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, mental illness, substance abuse and violence (Fluke et al., 2010). However, Feely and Bosk (2021) propose a combined and third explanation that they call the ‘structural risk explanation’. This explanation assumes that disproportionality emerges from structural biases and racism in society, which results in the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources, which in turn elevates the risk for maltreatment and intellectual, psychological and parenting problems for certain groups. This is further amplified by disparity throughout the child welfare system, such as biased decision-making and delivery of services. Thus, the ‘structural risk explanation’ not only suggests an association between ethnicity and race, bias and racism, socioeconomic conditions and risk, but also implies that disproportionality and disparity are complex phenomena that cannot be explained by a single factor.

Taken together, the findings of different studies that have addressed the experiences, perspectives and understandings of child welfare professionals confirm the latter. For example, Ards et al. (2012) have examined racialised perceptions of child welfare professionals in the United States and found that these have a strong impact on disproportionality. However, a study by Font et al. (2012) has shown that disproportionality and disparity in the United States are not driven by child welfare professionals perceiving or treating Black and White children differently. The authors concluded that these phenomena exist rather because Black children are more disadvantaged in terms of demographic and socioeconomic factors. In addition, studies in Canada and the United States have addressed the perceptions of child welfare professionals and found that professionals believe different and multiple dynamics and factors to contribute to disproportionality and disparity. The findings revealed that professionals consider bias and racism in reports, bias and racism among child welfare professionals, lack of collaboration and trust between child welfare organisations and families, lack of culturally appropriate resources, lack of cultural sensitivity around parenting practices, lack of workforce diversity and training, assessment tools for decision-making, fear of liability, holding onto past transgressions and poverty to be important factors (Antwi-Boasiako, 2020; Miller et al., 2012).

2.4 Cultural competence of child welfare professionals

Although cultural competence is widely recognised as an important feature or requirement for child welfare professionals and organisations, there is no consensus about what the concept means or looks like. Attempts to clarify cultural competence have rather led to a “growing number of new concepts on cross-cultural working, all of which arguably have more in common than what distinguishes them” (Käkelä, 2020, p. 426). Examples of such concepts are culturally grounded work, cultural humility and cultural sensitivity (Hall & Rammell, 2017; Marsiglia et al., 2021). Nevertheless, cultural competence was originally introduced as a response to the need to work with culturally or ethnically minoritised groups in a culturally appropriate, effective and respectful way. Over time, the concept has evolved to become anti-oppressive and incorporate all groups at risk of social exclusion (Harrison & Turner, 2011; Nadan, 2017). This is in line with how the NASW (2015) refers to cultural competence, namely as “the process by which individuals and systems respond effectively and respectfully to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors” (p. 15) in a manner that affirms, recognises and values the worth as well as preserves the dignity of individuals, families and communities.

2.4.1 Components and models

Despite ambiguity about what cultural competence means or looks like, models that describe the concept commonly consider cultural competence to be a developing and ongoing process of improvement and learning rather than an accomplished endpoint (Campinha-Bacote, 2002; Laird & Tendam, 2019; Marsiglia et al., 2021; Papadopoulos et al., 2006; Sue, 2001). Furthermore, these models have in common a focus on awareness of own attitudes, beliefs and values, knowledge of diverse cultural or ethnic groups and their needs, and skills as important components or elements (e.g. Balcazar et al., 2009; Bellaart et al., 2018; Campinha-Bacote, 2002; McPhatter, 1997; Marsiglia et al., 2021; Papadopoulos, 2006; Sue, 2001; Van de Haterd et al., 2010). These components are interconnected and interdependent. McPhatter (1997) states that “although each component represents a substantive goal in itself, none is sufficient alone to produce competent cross-cultural practice” (p. 262). In addition, some models also encompass other components. Campinha-Bacote (2002) adds cultural desire, which is the motivation to engage in the process of cultural competence or the passion to accept differences, to be flexible and open with others and to be willing to learn from others as cultural informants. This component bears resemblances to what others call cultural humility or cultural sensitivity. Moreover, some models contain a component of social justice.

According to these models, addressing and challenging inequalities as well as dynamics of power is also part of cultural competence (Marsiglia et al., 2021; Papadopoulos et al., 2006). Finally, because professionals' daily work is often a function of the guidelines and policies of organisations where they work, Balcazar et al. (2009) emphasise the role of the organisational context in cultural competence. They include organisational support as an additional component, which they define as the contextual opportunities to become culturally competent and the value placed in the promotion of other cultures.

Different studies that have addressed the experiences, perspectives and understandings of child welfare professionals or social work professionals with regard to cultural competence also reflect these components. Harrison and Turner (2011) have found that according to Australian social work professionals, cultural competence implies respecting and valuing diversity, being open to other cultures and being able to work with people from different backgrounds, and pertains to attitudes, behaviours and skills. Studies in Australia and Scotland have shown that social work professionals consider knowledge to be an important component of cultural competence as well. The findings revealed that professionals emphasise both knowledge of their own beliefs and values, which requires self-reflection, and knowledge of other cultures (Käkelä, 2020; Testa, 2017). However, Testa (2017) concluded that since professionals can “never know every culture” (p. 102), they find cultural humility more appropriate and respectful. Furthermore, from interviews that Petrovich and Lowe (2005) and Willis et al. (2017) have conducted with American and English social work professionals, it appears that professionals distinguish between competence and confidence. They can view themselves as being aware, knowledgeable and trained in skills, but at the same time lack the confidence to put this into practice. In addition, social work professionals recognise that cultural competence is not only about individual qualities, but also about the organisational context. In a synthesis of qualitative studies across different parts of the world, Volckmar-Eeg and Enoksen (2020) revealed that according to professionals, organisations have the authority to ensure that cultural competence is employed and increased through training, but on the other hand, deadlines and time constraints hamper cultural competence.

2.4.2 Criticism and alternatives

Although cultural competence has achieved acceptance and a positive status, the concept has also faced criticism. Several authors argue, for example, that cultural competence tends to be tokenistic, lacks a coherent theoretical foundation, treats culture as a neutral phenomenon rather than a social construct and relies on the dubious notion that cultural competence is about

attitudes, knowledge and skills that are simply added onto professionals' current competence (Beagan, 2018; Danso, 2018; Furlong & Wight, 2011; Greene-Moton & Minkler, 2020; Johnson & Munch, 2009; Marsiglia et al., 2021). Moreover, cultural competence is criticised for assuming that professionals are from a dominant culture and for expecting cultural knowledge or literacy among professionals, both of which exacerbate power relations between culturally or ethnically minoritised clients and professionals (Furlong & Wight, 2011; Ortega & Faller, 2011). Pon (2009) even considers the concept to be a new form of racism, because it devalues and otherises non-dominant cultures. These arguments are related to another point of criticism with regard to cultural competence, namely that the concept relegates all aspects of difference and diversity to culture and therefore fails to acknowledge and address other social mechanisms and processes that produce ethnic and racial inequalities and injustices (Beagan, 2018; Danso, 2018; Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Garran & Rozas, 2013; Gottlieb, 2021; Käkälä, 2020; Nadan, 2017; Ortega & Faller, 2011; Park, 2005).

In the light of this criticism, several authors have argued to replace or complement cultural competence with cultural humility (Beagan, 2018; Gottlieb, 2021; Ortega & Faller, 2011; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). They contend that cultural humility places the professional in a developing or learning mode as opposed to maintaining power, control and authority, therefore being open and teachable rather than being effective and skilled when working with culturally or ethnically minoritised groups. However, in a critical analysis of both concepts, Danso (2018) states that cultural humility does not add more value to child welfare or social work practice than cultural competence. First, cultural competence and cultural humility have the same intentions. Both concepts emerged from the recognition to address and reflect on biases and to understand the realities of the diverse cultural or ethnic groups with whom child welfare professionals and organisations interact (Greene-Moton & Minkler, 2020). Furthermore, the components ascribed to cultural humility, which are an ongoing process of self-awareness and inquiry, openness, and recognition of power relations in the child welfare system (Gottlieb, 2021; Ortega & Faller, 2011), are similar to those of cultural competence. For these reasons, several authors consider cultural humility to be an integral aspect or element of cultural competence (Campinha-Bacote, 2002; Danso, 2018; NASW, 2015).

As Danso (2018) concluded, “perhaps the problem with cultural competence is not the concept itself, but rather the myriad ways in which different researchers in different places and times have (mis)conceptualized, (mis)interpreted, and (mis)understood the concept” (p. 418). In addition, studies have shown that for child welfare professionals or social work professionals, it is not what cultural competence is called, but rather what it stands for, in terms of the values

that underlie it and how these translate into practice, that matters (Harrison & Turner, 2011; Marsiglia et al. 2021). According to these professionals, cultural competence essentially symbolises an ethical stance on practice. Therefore, within this study, the concept of cultural competence is used in this broad sense.

2.5 Intersectionality

A promising concept to alleviate some of the criticism on cultural competence, especially the criticism with regard to overculturalisation of minoritised groups and negligence to other social mechanisms and processes that produce ethnic and racial inequalities and injustices, is intersectionality (Danso, 2018; Garran & Rozas, 2013; Ortega & Faller, 2011). According to Garran and Rozas (2013), “using this concept is essential in creating a more comprehensive view of cultural competence” (p. 99). Intersectionality originates from Black feminism and refers to the complexity and multidimensionality of cultural experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Marsiglia et al., 2021). Rather than focusing on single or summed axes or categories of identity, the concept considers the interactions between different and multiple axes or categories and describes the point where these axes or categories come together. In line with this, Konstantoni and Emejulu (2017) define intersectionality as “the simultaneous and interacting effects of class, gender, national origin, race, sexual orientation and others [e.g. religion, migration status, age and ability] as categories of identity” (p. 7). Furthermore, intersectionality emphasises and examines discrimination, domination, oppression and power, and their reciprocal relation with axes or categories of identity (Few-Demo, 2014; Hankivsky, 2012; Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017; Marsiglia et al., 2021). As the intersections of axes or categories lead to a variety of experiences and opportunities, this produces inequalities and injustices that are not mere reflections of the sum of inequalities and injustices related to each axis or category in isolation (Webb et al., 2020). Therefore, intersectionality enables the examination of these simultaneous and interacting impacts of different processes and structures of power, such as classism, sexism, racism and heterosexism (Hankivsky, 2012).

Within research, intersectionality is often used as a theoretical framework or as a tool for analysing diversity, differences, inequalities and injustices (Few-Demo, 2014; Käkälä, 2020). For example, Williams-Butler et al. (2019) have employed the concept to examine how oppressions based on class, gender and race influence disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system in the United States, because these phenomena cannot be explained by ethnicity and race or socioeconomic conditions and risk only. The authors found that intersectionality is essential to understanding the experiences and oppressions of Black

children, youth and families in the child welfare system. In addition, intersectional disparities also exist in child welfare systems in Europe. Middel et al. (2020) have shown how intersections between gender and migrant background influence decision-making in England, Germany and the Netherlands. On the other hand, within child welfare practice, intersectionality is a useful framework or tool that encourages child welfare professionals to reflect on and value diversity among clients. Because the concept places the identities of clients at the centre of practice, it allows professionals to better understand their characteristics and needs (Bellaart et al., 2021; Marsiglia et al., 2021). In addition, intersectionality enables child welfare professionals to acknowledge and challenge processes and structures of power that underlie these identities and their intersections. According to Konstantoni and Emejulu (2017), intersectionality is not simply a framework, but also “a counter-hegemonic praxis that seeks to challenge and displace hegemonic whiteness and patriarchy [among others]” (p. 15). Therefore, intersectionality assembles two goals or principles of child welfare practice, namely advocacy for social justice and respecting the dignity and worth of clients (Garran & Rozas, 2013).

To align with culturally or ethnically minoritised groups and their experiences of discrimination, domination, oppression and power, but at the same time prevent overculturalisation of these minoritised groups as well as strengthen the social justice component included in some models of cultural competence, the concept of intersectionality is included in this study to complement and reinforce cultural competence.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research design

To answer the research question, an exploratory and qualitative study has been conducted. Because little is known about the experiences and perspectives of child welfare professionals in the province of Groningen with regard to cultural and ethnic diversity and the concepts of disproportionality and disparity, cultural competence and intersectionality, an exploratory approach is relevant (Stebbins, 2001). Furthermore, a qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of these experiences and perspectives (Flick, 2014; Hennink et al., 2011).

The underlying paradigm is constructivism, which assumes a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A relativist ontology contends that there are multiple realities rather than multiple conceptualisations of one and the same reality. This means that within constructivism, the focus is not on obtaining an objective reality but on understanding how participants interpret and give meaning to their subjective realities. In addition, a subjectivist epistemology implies that participants and the researcher cocreate such understandings through interaction and interpretation. Therefore, constructivism allows to explore and understand the interpretations and meanings that child welfare professionals in the province of Groningen give to cultural and ethnic diversity in child welfare practice.

3.2 Participants and recruitment

The study population consists of professionals who are currently working in the child welfare system in the province of Groningen and are in direct contact with children and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups. Furthermore, the focus lies on professionals who are working in child and youth support specifically, because this is the largest component of the Dutch child welfare system and because the increase in the absolute number and the proportion of culturally or ethnically minoritised clients over the past five years occurred in this component of the system, both in the province of Groningen and in the Netherlands as a whole (CBS, 2022). No other exclusion or inclusion criteria have been used. This allows to “represent the field in its diversity by using as many different cases as possible in order to be able to present evidence on the distribution of ways of experiencing or seeing things” (Flick, 2014, p. 177), which fits the exploratory approach of this study.

Due to limited resources and time, convenience sampling has been used as a sampling method. This sampling method leads to a selection of child welfare professionals who are the easiest to access under the given circumstances and conditions (Flick, 2014). Through

the network of the supervisor, a child welfare organisation was found that was willing to facilitate the study. A contact within this organisation approached the professionals who are working here and who met the inclusion criteria, either face-to-face, by telephone or by email. Eight participants were recruited in this way. In addition, a contact within the network of the researcher suggested two professionals who are working at other child welfare organisations and who were willing to participate in the study. The researcher contacted these professionals by telephone, which resulted in one participant. Finally, an appeal was placed on an online platform for alumni of the University of Groningen and through snowballing, the researcher approached another professional who was willing to participate in the study by telephone. However, this did not yield any more participants. Therefore, the sample of this study consists of nine child welfare professionals. None of them identified as culturally or ethnically minoritised. Table 1 provides information about these participants.

Table 1 Participant information

Characteristic	Number of participants
Gender	
Female	8
Male	1
Function or occupation	
Orthopedagogue	3
Psychologist	1
Family home parent	3
Family home matching worker	1
Ambulatory family support worker	1
Experience in child and youth support	
0 to 5 years	3
5 to 10 years	3
> 10 years	3

3.3 Instrument and data collection

The data for this study have been collected through interviews, which are suitable for capturing participants' interpretations and meanings attached to experiences, perceptions and stories (Hennink et al., 2011). This is in line with the qualitative approach of this study. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, based on the research questions and theoretical exploration that are central to this study. As a semi-structured design is suitable for constructing participants' subjective realities, this fits the constructivist paradigm underlying this study (Flick, 2014). Furthermore, a semi-structured design enables participants to discuss their experiences and perspectives as well as bring up issues that are important to them according to the themes raised by the researcher (Hennink et al., 2011; Flick, 2014).

The interview guide consisted of four themes: a) information about the professional; b) culture, ethnicity and culturally or ethnically minoritised groups; c) disproportionality and disparity; d) cultural competence. Whereas the concept of disproportionality and disparity as well as the concept of cultural competence were included as themes, the concept of intersectionality was not. Because this concept influences disproportionality and disparity, and is used to complement and reinforce the concept of cultural competence, the questions and probes related to this concept were subsumed under these two themes. Each theme was divided into open questions and additional probes, the latter of which lead to more depth, detail and illustration (Flick, 2014). The interview guide is included in Appendix A.

The interviews have been conducted in May 2022. Participants could choose whether they wanted to conduct the interview face-to-face or online using video-conferencing technology. This technology allows for data to be collected face-to-face but remote, live and real-time, making the online interview most similar to a regular or traditional interview (Torrentira, 2020). Therefore, seven interviews were conducted at participants' homes or workplaces and two interviews were conducted online. The interviews were conducted in Dutch and lasted between 30 minutes and 75 minutes, with an average of 50 minutes. During the interviews, the researcher applied an approach by Rubin and Rubin (2012) called responsive interviewing. This approach emphasises establishing a relationship of trust between the participant and the researcher, which leads to more give-and-take during the interview. In line with this approach, questions were asked in an empathic, friendly and gentle as well as flexible way. Questions evolved in response to what was told by participants and did not always follow the order as listed in the interview guide. Furthermore, the researcher took an active attitude by reacting to the stories of participants, verbally and non-verbally, and using both prepared and spontaneous probes. At the same time, participants were ensured to finish their stories to be sure their full experiences and perspectives were captured.

3.4 Data analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, which captures information in participants' own words, phrases and expressions (Hennink et al., 2011). The interview transcripts have been imported, coded and analysed using the software programme ATLAS.ti. Thematic analysis has been used as a method for analysing and reporting themes within the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is “ a flexible and useful tool which can provide a detailed and rich, yet complex, account of data” (p. 78) and “involves searching across a dataset to find repeated patterns of meaning” (p. 86). Their approach was followed, as

it fits the exploratory nature of this study. Furthermore, in line with Thornberg (2012), existing literature and theories were used as lenses or tools to focus on certain aspects or concepts within the data. As these are used in a creative, flexible and sensitive way, this enables the researcher to be informed as well as to have an open attitude towards the data. Therefore, “the researcher not only situates his or her study and its product in the current knowledge base of the field, but also contributes to it by extending, challenging, refining or revising it” (Thornberg, 2012, p. 255). This allows to extend and refine existing theories on the concepts of disproportionality and disparity, cultural competence and intersectionality based on the practical experiences, perspectives and understandings of child welfare professionals.

In line with Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis was conducted in phases. During the first phase of familiarising oneself with the data, the interviews transcripts were read in an active way and initial ideas about the interviews were written down. Second, the data were coded using both deductive and inductive codes (Thornberg, 2012). The theoretical exploration of this study, including the concepts of disproportionality and disparity, cultural competence and intersectionality, laid the foundation for the development of deductive codes. Furthermore, developing inductive codes from the data enabled the researcher to capture new concepts and themes that were brought up by participants (Flick, 2014). The third phase consisted of categorising and organising these codes into themes using the tool ‘code co-occurrence table’ in ATLAS.ti. During the fourth and fifth phase, these themes were reviewed and defined. Therefore, the codes and the coded data underlying each theme were read and it was considered whether each theme captured the coded data and whether the codes and coded data these fitted under the theme, respectively. Several codes, for example ‘country of origin/nationality’, ‘physical characteristics/race’ and ‘religion’, were attributed to multiple themes. Finally, the thematic analysis resulted in 4 global themes, which are related to the concepts that are central to the theoretical exploration of this study, and 13 organising themes. An overview of the codes and themes is included in Appendix B.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen has reviewed and approved this study before the start. During recruitment, data collection and data analysis, important ethical issues with regard to participants, including informed consent, self-determination, minimisation of harm, anonymity and confidentiality, have been considered and taken into account (Hennink et al., 2011).

Participants were provided with an information letter and an informed consent form during recruitment. The information letter described the aim of the study, how the data would be collected, how the data would be handled with regard to anonymity and confidentiality, and the right to self-determination, which means that participants could refuse to participate or withdraw from the study without negative consequences. This information was partly repeated in the introduction of the interviews. Furthermore, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions both after reading the letter of information and after the introduction of the interviews. Participants signed the informed consent form either personally or online.

After data collection and before data analysis, the data were anonymised by omitting names of individuals, organisations and places from the interview transcripts. In this thesis, participants' anonymity is further ensured by providing limited information about them and using quotes from which they cannot be identified. Finally, the informed consent forms, audio recordings and interview transcripts were stored carefully at the secured domain of the University of Groningen. These are only accessible to the researcher and the supervisor, and partly to a bachelor student who uses a part of the data for her thesis.

4. Findings

This findings section first elaborates what participants understand by the terms ‘culture’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘culturally or ethnically minoritised groups’. Second, it discusses participants’ reflections on disproportionality and disparity, relating these reflections to how they perceive working with children and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups compared to those from culturally or ethnically advantaged groups. Then, the findings on what participants understand by and how they translate cultural competence into practice are presented. Finally, it is discussed how professionals take into account intersectionality and its dynamics of power when working with children and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups.

4.1 Understanding culture, ethnicity and culturally or ethnically minoritised groups

In explaining what culture means to them, participants mentioned multiple elements and provided various definitions. Most of them perceived culture as something big and broad. For example, participant 1 defined culture as the backgrounds people bring with them and participant 9 said: “I think that culture is a number of... for me, it is a number of characteristics that are reflected in an entire population group in a certain way, I think”.¹ On the other hand, culture does not necessarily occur on a grand scale for all participants. Participant 3 mentioned that culture can be defined close to home and participant 4 defines culture as those characteristics that people get from home. Despite these various definitions, elements that the majority of participants attributed to culture are norms and values as well as lifeways. With regard to the latter, customs, food and traditions were often mentioned. Several participants also related culture to elements such as language, religion and upbringing. In addition, the majority of participants paid attention to how culture and its elements are connected to the environments in which people grow up or live, whether these be certain communities, geographical regions or countries. According to participant 8, culture is “(...) where you are from and where you grew up. That can be because you were born and raised in another country and then adopt the culture of, well, your ancestors. But culture can also be in which district of a city or country you grew up. Or in the countryside, that is also culture”.² Furthermore, participant 5 drew a connection between culture and physical environmental elements: “It has to do with the land or soil you

¹ “Ik denk dat cultuur een aantal... voor mij zijn dat een aantal kenmerken die je bij een hele bevolkingsgroep op een bepaalde manier terugziet denk ik.”

² “(...) waar je vandaan komt en waar je opgegroeid bent. Dat kan zijn omdat je in een ander land geboren bent en opgegroeid bent en dan de cultuur aanneemt van, nou, van je voorouders. Maar cultuur kan ook zijn in welke wijk van een stad of van een land je opgroeit. Of op het platteland, dat is ook een cultuur.”

live on, the climate you live in, uhm, well, the products, the wealth, the well-being”.³ Finally, as they mentioned that culture is passed on from generation to generation, participant 5 and participant 6 referred to the intergenerational element of culture. Participant 6 said: “Those norms and values that were imprinted on you as a child, you take those with you”.⁴

With regard to what ethnicity means to them, several participants could not come up with anything. Other participants expressed difficulties in distinguishing ethnicity from culture. As participant 9 said: “I think more or less the same [as culture] but I have to think for a moment. Because now I am thinking about ethnicity, what it includes for example, uh, and then I also think about culture. (...) in my mind there is a lot over overlap between the two concepts.”⁵ Moreover, the overlap between culture and ethnicity was evident from the fact that participants related ethnicity to certain elements that were identified as part of or related to culture as well, such as language, lifeways and religion. Furthermore, another element that several participants attributed to ethnicity is physical characteristics or race, often referred to by mentioning skin colour. Participant 5 identified ethnicity in relation to minoritised groups and power: “Ethnicity, those are the minorities who, uhm, it is not so much an origin, a country, but more a group of people who are less fortunate, who have a hard time climbing that Maslow’s hierarchy properly based on a position in the world. It feels a lot like oppression to me”.⁶

The majority of participants understood culturally or ethnically minoritised groups as people who are disadvantaged by others, seen differently and treated differently, and hence face discrimination and oppression. For example, participant 8 explained: “The people who belong to that minority, or well, who have been made to belong to that minority by whoever, they are actually so powerless that they have no way out”.⁷ Participant 5 and participant 9 emphasised that culturally or ethnically minoritised groups have different or less opportunities compared to culturally or ethnically advantaged or dominant groups. In addition, participants mentioned various factors or grounds based on which minoritisation occurs. With regard to cultural or ethnic factors, participant 1 defined culturally or ethnically minoritised groups as people who are

³ “Het heeft te maken met de grond waarop je leeft, het klimaat waarin je woont, uhm, nou ja, de producten, de welvaart, het welzijn.”

⁴ “Die normen en waarden die zijn jou als kind zo ingegeven, daar ga je mee door.”

⁵ “Ik denk eigenlijk een beetje hetzelfde [als cultuur], maar ik moet even nadenken. Want ik zit nu te denken aan etniciteit, wat dan bijvoorbeeld, uh, daaronder zou vallen en dan denk ik ook aan cultuur. (...) in mijn hoofd overlapt het heel erg, de twee begrippen.”

⁶ “Etniciteit, dat zijn toch de minderheden die, uhm, dat is niet zozeer een oorsprong, een land, maar meer een groep mensen die het minder hebben, die vanuit een positie in de wereld het lastig hebben om die Maslow ladder goed te beklimmen. Ik voel ‘m heel erg in de onderdrukking.”

⁷ “De mensen die tot die minderheid behoren, of tenminste, die door wie dan ook maar tot die minderheid zijn komen te behoren, die staan eigenlijk zo machteloos dat ze geen kant op kunnen.”

disadvantaged based on culture or religion and participant 4 referred to a client who is minoritised and treated differently because of the accent in speech. However, these factors and grounds are not limited to culture or ethnicity. The majority of participants perceived minoritisation as something broader. For example, participants mentioned underlying economic and social factors, such as education, function or occupation, and finances or income. Participant 7 said: “It is sometimes very much assigned to, right, foreigners, to skin colour, but I think that in the Netherlands as well, uh, even in the workplace it occurs. Yes, I think it is very broad”.⁸ Nevertheless, physical characteristics or race appeared to be the most important ground for minoritisation, as almost all participants mention discrimination or oppression based on skin colour. Participant 2, who referred to different groups of migrants as culturally or ethnically minoritised groups, also linked this to their skin colour: “I think that it is very visible now with the Ukrainian refugees compared to the Syrians and the Eritreans (...), that we as the Dutch deal with them differently. I find that interesting, why that is the case. Whether that purely has to do with skin colour, or uhm, Europe and outside Europe et cetera”.⁹ Finally, participant 1, participant 7 and participant 9 explicitly emphasised that they themselves do not perceive the people that they define as such as culturally or ethnically minoritised groups.

Examples of and references to the ways in which participants encounter and work with culture, ethnicity and culturally or ethnically minoritised groups are addressed and included in section 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4. Nevertheless, when discussing these terms, all participants immediately connected them to difference and diversity. For the majority of the participants, this is important to them and their daily work, whereas several participants indicated that other issues or problems related to the development of children and youth are equally or more important.

4.2 Disproportionality and disparity of culturally or ethnically minoritised groups

In general, the phenomenon of disproportionality was not recognised by participants, neither within the organisations that they are working at nor within the child welfare system as a whole. Also after providing them the example of Moroccan, Turkish and other culturally or ethnically minoritised children and youth who are underrepresented in milder types of services but overrepresented in severe types of services, participant 6 said “Well, I have not experienced that,

⁸ “Het wordt soms wel heel erg geplakt op, hè, buitenlanders, op huidskleur, maar ik denk dat in Nederland dat je dan ook, uh, zelfs op de werkvloer gewoon dat ziet. Ja, ik vind dat heel breed.”

⁹ “Ik vind dat je dat nu heel zichtbaar ziet bij de Oekraïense vluchtelingen ten opzichte van de Syriërs en de Eritreeërs (...), dat we daar als Nederlanders toch anders mee omgaan. Dat vind ik wel interessant, waarom dat zo is. Of dat puur met huidskleur te maken heeft, of uhm, Europa en buiten Europa et cetera.”

no”¹⁰ and participant 7 responded with “Yes, is that the case?”.¹¹ Participant 5 and participant 9 were the only participants who referred to disproportionality of culturally or ethnically minoritised groups, namely overrepresentation in foster care and underrepresentation in psychological and parenting support, respectively. In contrast, participants were familiar with the phenomenon of disparity. Although several participants explained how they encounter and experience unequal treatment of culturally or ethnically minoritised groups, participant 1 and participant 4 wondered whether this happens within the organisation that they are working at. Nevertheless, the majority of participants identified or referred to factors or dynamics that contribute to disproportionality and disparity, which are indicative for working with culturally or ethnically minoritised groups compared to culturally or ethnically advantaged groups. These factors or dynamics are related to: a) a lack of consideration of culture and ethnicity; b) bias and prejudice or c) risk and vulnerability.

As these were mentioned by the majority of participants, factors and dynamics related to a lack of consideration of culture appeared to be the most important. For example, participant 2, participant 5 and participant 7 referred to a lack of cultural sensitivity within organisations and the child welfare system as a whole as a factor that contributes to disparity. Participant 7 spoke about her foster child: “The mother stated very clearly ‘I cannot do it, I cannot take care of my children right now’. And yet the children were returned to their home because those are the Dutch rules, while that mother was not used to taking care of her children by herself. Then child and youth support does not take into account cultural background”.¹² This example refers to a discrepancy between Dutch individualism and collectivism, which is common among certain culturally or ethnically minoritised groups. In line with this, participant 2 mentioned a lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of professionals: “We often had youth whose parents did not speak Dutch (...) and then, for example, became in need of help or had to go to a hospital. Something was going on with the parents, which meant that youth had to do or arrange this for their parents. I noticed that among a lot of professionals, among the majority really, there was some lack of understanding for this culture of ‘we’ and what it entails”.¹³ Furthermore, participant 3 reflected on why there are no Moroccan and Turkish children

¹⁰ “Nou, die ervaring heb ik niet zo, nee.”

¹¹ “Ja, is dat zo?”

¹² “De moeder gaf heel duidelijk aan “ik kan het niet, ik kan niet voor m’n kinderen zorgen op dit moment”. En toch, dat de kinderen toch teruggeplaatst werden omdat dat vanuit Nederland moet, terwijl die moeder niet gewend was om alleen voor haar kinderen te zorgen. Dan wordt vanuit de hulpverlening niet gekeken naar culturele achtergrond.”

¹³ “We hadden heel vaak jongeren waarvan de ouders geen Nederlands konden spreken (...) en dan bijvoorbeeld hulpbehoevend werden of naar het ziekenhuis moesten. Er speelde iets met de ouders waardoor de jongeren dat voornamelijk voor hun ouders moesten doen of regelen. Ik merkte bij heel veel professionals, echt wel bij de meerderheid, dat daar toch wat onbegrip voor was, voor deze wij-cultuur en wat daarbij komt kijken.”

involved in the organisation that she is working at and referred to a taboo on help and support as a factor. She mentioned that in certain culturally or ethnically minoritised groups, parents can lose prestige if they admit that they need help or support from child welfare. Finally, participant 9 perceived a lack of information about help and support as a factor that contributes to disproportionality of culturally or ethnically minoritised groups: “I can imagine that those families are less likely to find access to milder types of support. Because they may not be able to access that information, because they may not know where they can go for example”.¹⁴

Second, several participants mentioned bias and prejudice as factors that contribute to both disproportionality and disparity. They mainly referred to bias and prejudice at the level of individuals or professionals and based on physical characteristics or race. In addition, professionals indicated that bias and prejudice can be unconscious. Participant 1 said: “I think that [i.e. disproportionality and disparity] is because of prejudice that does exist. Uhm, that this still plays a role in little things, which we are not always aware of”.¹⁵ On the other hand, participant 4 paid attention to bias and prejudice at the organisational level as well. She mentioned that if organisations are not aware of and do not deal with bias and prejudice towards certain culturally or ethnically minoritised groups, this can emerge quickly and unconsciously.

With regard to factors and dynamics related to risk and vulnerability, participant 3 drew a connection between poverty and disproportionality. “We live in the province of Groningen and uhm, here the prospects are not always great for parents so yes, they may be more likely to slap because they cannot quite make it financially”.¹⁶ This mainly relates to culturally or ethnically minoritised groups whose minoritisation is based upon economic and social factors, which is typical for all participants who mentioned factors and dynamics related to risk and vulnerability. In addition, participant 6 provided an example of how poverty and childhood violence led to unequal treatment of one of her clients: “We had a care consultation with a very vulnerable pregnant woman (...). Then they said in that care consultation ‘well, we are so concerned about the safety of this unborn child, that the child must go to a foster family immediately after birth’. ‘It is like we are talking about a pack of butter instead of a baby’, I said”.¹⁷

¹⁴ “Ik kan me wel voorstellen dat die gezinnen minder snel de toegang vinden tot lichte hulp. Omdat ze misschien niet bij die informatie komen, omdat ze misschien toch wat minder goed weten waar je terecht kan bijvoorbeeld.”

¹⁵ “Ik denk dat dat [i.e. onevenredigheid en ongelijkheid] toch komt door vooroordelen die er toch wel zijn. Uhm, dat dat in hele kleine dingen nog steeds wel speelt, waar we zelfs soms niet eens alert op zijn.”

¹⁶ “We wonen in de provincie Groningen en uhm, hier zijn de vooruitzichten ook voor ouders niet altijd even fantastisch en ja, dan wordt er misschien eerder een tik uitgedeeld omdat ze het financieel niet helemaal voor elkaar kunnen boksen.”

¹⁷ “We hadden een zorgoverleg met een zeer kwetsbare zwangere (...). Toen zeiden ze in dat zorgoverleg dat van nou, we hebben zoveel zorgen om de veiligheid van dit ongeboren kindje, dat het kindje direct na de geboorte naar een pleeggezin moet. Het lijkt wel alsof we over een pakje boter praten, zei ik, in plaats van een baby.”

4.3 Understanding and translating cultural competence into practice

According to participants, being able to adapt and respond to the backgrounds and needs of their clients was the core of this competence. For example, participant 3 mentioned that in her occupation “actually you are doing nothing but looking at how you adapt and connect to the background of the child, so what is the cultural background of the child”.¹⁸ In explaining how to do this and what is important in this, professionals identified various components of cultural competence, which are reflected in the examples they gave and stories they told about working with culturally or ethnically minoritised groups. These components are grouped into the following themes: a) awareness; b) knowledge, c) skills; d) desire, humility or sensitivity; e) social justice; f) organisational context.

With regard to awareness, participants distinguished between awareness of their own cultural and ethnic background on the one hand and awareness of their clients’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds on the other hand. As participant 1 illustrated: “Everyone views the world from their own frame of reference. I as a professional have that, but so do the people I work with. And I think it is very important to be aware of that”.¹⁹ However, awareness of clients’ cultural and ethnic background is closely related to knowledge and skills, as participants associated this with being aware of the cultural and ethnic factors at play and the ways in which to respond to these when working with culturally or ethnically minoritised groups. When discussing awareness of their own culture and ethnicity, all participants mentioned reflecting on their own culture and ethnicity as well as on their own attitudes, beliefs and values as a component. For example, participant 2 explained: “I grew up on a white school, followed the regular path of primary school, secondary school and then university, and have a certain community around me with the same norms and values. So I try to be aware of that, but I think I can still learn a lot in that respect”.²⁰ In addition, participant 7 and 8 emphasised the importance of religion to them and how this affects their daily work. A second component related to awareness is letting go of own frames of reference. Several participants provided examples of discrepancies between their beliefs and values and those of their clients, and how they took the client’s perspective. For example, participant 6 said: “Immigrants often let their children

¹⁸ “Je bent alleen maar aan het kijken van hoe stem je af op de achtergrond van het kind, dus uit welke culturele achtergrond komt het kind.”

¹⁹ “Ieder persoon kijkt vanuit een eigen referentiekader de wereld in. Dat heb ik als hulpverlener, maar dat hebben ook de mensen waarmee ik werk. En ik denk dat het heel belangrijk is om je daarvan bewust te zijn.”

²⁰ “Ik ben opgegroeid op een witte school, heb het normale pad gevolgd van basisschool, middelbare school en dan universiteit en heb een bepaalde gemeenschap om mij heen met dezelfde normen en waarden. Dus ik probeer me daar wel bewust van te zijn, maar ik kan, vind ik zelf, nog heel veel leren in dat opzicht.”

sleep in bed with them. Well, here in the Netherlands that is a taboo. A child should sleep in its own bed. But well, if it is a custom, who am I to say that it is not allowed?”.²¹ Finally, participant 1 and participant 8 mentioned not engaging in bias and prejudice as a component and explained that being aware of their own bias and prejudice allows them to reflect on them.

The majority of participants identified knowledge as a component of cultural competence. This concerned knowledge about different cultures, ethnicities and associated elements. According to participant 5, knowledge about clients’ backgrounds is important in working with all clients, but especially in working with those from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups: “Because the white Dutch, that is somewhat your world”.²² Both participant 7 and participant 9 paid attention to the limits of knowledge. However, whereas participant 9 thinks it is impossible to know about all cultures and ethnicities that professionals encounter and work with, participant 7 believes this is difficult yet possible. “I really do not think it is impossible, but just a lot of work to delve into this”.²³

Third, understanding clients’ behaviour through culture and ethnicity was one of the skills that participants attributed to cultural competence. All participants provided examples of how they applied this skill in practice when working with culturally or ethnically minoritised groups. Participant 4 referred to one of her clients who never looked his family home parent in the eye: “For example, he did something, he was given a talking-to and he never looked her in the eye, whereupon at first she was like uhm, look me in the eye. Only later, by delving into that culture, it turned out that this is actually a matter of respect, that you do not look a parent in the eye”.²⁴ This example, as well as other participants’ stories, illustrates that understanding clients’ behaviour through culture and ethnicity is closely related to the component of knowledge, as knowledge about different cultures, ethnicities and associated elements can be a prerequisite for using this skill. On the other hand, discussing culture and ethnicity with clients, which was referred to by the majority of participants, can yield knowledge. According to participant 3, it is important to “not just put a stamp on it, but hey, did you check this [with the client]”.²⁵ An example of how this skill is used, was provided by participant 8. “We have had strict Muslim parents who, for example, did not want their children to come with us to a

²¹ “Allochtonen houden vaak hun kinderen bij hun in bed. Nou, hier in Nederland is dat een taboe. Een kind hoort in een eigen bed te slapen. Maar ja, als het daar gewoonte is, wie ben ik dan om te zeggen dat dat niet mag?”

²² “Omdat de witte Nederlander, dat is enigszins jouw wereld.”

²³ “Ik denk echt niet dat het onmogelijk is, maar gewoon wel heel veel werk om je daarin te verdiepen.”

²⁴ “Hij had bijvoorbeeld wat gedaan, dan kreeg hij op z'n kop en keek hij haar nooit aan, waarop zij in het begin heel erg was van ja uhm, kijk me even aan. Alleen later, door in te lezen in die cultuur, bleek dus dat dit juist een respect iets is, dat een ouder niet in de ogen aankijkt.”

²⁵ “Niet zomaar een stempel opplakken, maar hé, heb je dit nagevraagd (bij de cliënt).”

Christian church, who did not want their children to eat pork. Yes, we try to take that into account, but also discuss it. If we go to church and the child is five years old for example, then how are we going to do that? Do we leave the child at home, do we have to arrange a babysitter or can we, after consultation, take the child with us nevertheless?”.²⁶ In addition, several participants expressed how they helped clients from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups to bridge differences in norms and values. They did this by naming differences, explaining Dutch norms and values, and providing support, without condemning or judging. Participant 2 told about a pregnant client: “For example, Eritrean women do not tell that they are pregnant, even if it is obvious. But within education, it is beneficial to arrange maternity leave for these students. I approached an Eritrean community (...), then they advised me to run this through her best friend. That I approached this friend first, that she started a conversation with her and that eventually, they came to talk to me together. I liked this way, as you respect their culture as well as ensure that things are arranged well here in the Netherlands”.²⁷ Finally, the majority of participants mentioned bonding and working together with clients. For participant 6, this skill was crucial in cultural competence: “Cultural competence is expressed through collaboration, through whether this is going well or not”.²⁸

With regard to components related to desire, humility or sensitivity, the majority of participants emphasised respecting and valuing cultural and ethnic diversity. They found it important to accept cultures, ethnicities and culturally or ethnically minoritised groups as they are. Participant 2 said: “I am not that quick to say ‘you just adapt here’. No, absolutely not”.²⁹ Another component that was discussed by participants is flexibility and openness. Although this component resembles letting go of own frames of reference, it relates to an open and receptive attitude towards different cultures, ethnicities and associated elements, and not to awareness and participants’ own beliefs and values. Nevertheless, flexibility and openness is closely related to respecting and valuing cultural and ethnic diversity, as participant 8 illustrated: “Who says that,

²⁶ “We hebben wel streng islamitische ouders gehad die bijvoorbeeld niet wilden dat hun kinderen met ons mee gingen naar een christelijke kerk, dat ze niet wilden dat hun kinderen varkensvlees aten. Ja, we proberen daar wel rekening mee te houden, maar er ook over in gesprek te gaan. Als wij naar de kerk gaan en het kind is bijvoorbeeld vijf jaar, hoe gaan we dat dan doen? Laten we het kind dan thuis, moeten een oppas regelen of kunnen we toch, in overleg, het kind meenemen?”

²⁷ “Eritrese vrouwen vertellen bijvoorbeeld niet dat ze zwanger zijn. Alleen binnen het onderwijs is het wel handig dat je zwangerschapsverlof regelt voor deze studenten. Ik heb contact gelegd met een Eritrese community, (...) toen hebben ze mij geadviseerd om dit via haar beste vriendin te laten lopen. Dus dat ik in contact eerst trad met deze vriendin, dat zij het gesprek met haar is aangegaan en dat ze uiteindelijk samen bij mij op gesprek kwamen. Dat vond ik fijn, om dit op die manier te doen, dat je respect hebt voor hun cultuur maar toch zorgt dat het hier in Nederland goed geregeld is.”

²⁸ “Culturele competentie komt tot uiting door de samenwerking, door of die wel of niet goed verloopt.”

²⁹ “Ik ben niet zo snel van je past je maar aan hier ofzo. Nee, absoluut niet.”

I always think who says that we have a monopoly on the truth and well, if you live that way, you can respect many kinds of beliefs”.³⁰ Furthermore, participant 2, participant 4, participant 5 and participant 9 expressed curiosity by showing an active interest in different cultures, ethnicities and associated elements. Finally, respecting and valuing cultural and ethnic diversity, flexibility and openness, and curiosity converge in another component that several participants attributed to cultural competence, namely being teachable. Participant 4 referred to learning from her clients: “Mainly talking with youth about well, how do you do that, how did you do that before, how did that go at your parents’?”³¹ In addition, participant 2 mentioned how she learned from colleagues: “It is nice to know people who do know a certain culture. (...) if I do not know myself, I look for another professional who does have that knowledge and perhaps also that experience, so I can learn from this. You do not have to do it alone”.³²

Both participant 1 and participant 5 paid attention to the social justice component of cultural competence, as they discussed minoritisation with clients from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups. They mainly referred to discrimination based on skin colour and mentioned that if their clients experienced this, they talked about this together. For example, participant 5 told about a client who experienced discrimination at school: “He said ‘well, you know, no matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, it is never right. I always have to run much faster’. I said ‘yes, you are right, what you say is right’. I said ‘but well, it is up to you how you deal with it’”.³³ For both participants, how their clients deal with or can deal with discrimination based on skin colour was an important topic of discussion.

With regard to the organisational context, participants distinguished between organisational support and support from colleagues. All participants mentioned that within the organisations that they are working at, attention is paid to cultural and ethnic diversity. Participant 3 noted: “I think this just exudes throughout the organisation”³⁴. In explaining organisational support with regard to cultural competence, the majority of participants referred to courses and trainings. However, participant 9 mentioned that within the organisation that she

³⁰ “Wie zegt dat, ik denk altijd wie zegt dat wij de waarheid in pacht hebben en nou, als je zo in het leven staat, kun je respect hebben voor heel veel soorten overtuigingen.”

³¹ “Vooraf veel in gesprek gaan met de jeugdigen van hè, maar hoe doe je dat dan, hoe deed je dat vroeger dan, uhm, hoe ging dat bij je ouders.”

³² “Het fijn om mensen te kennen een bepaalde cultuur wel kennen. (...) als ik het zelf niet weet, ga ik op zoek naar een andere professional die wel die kennis en misschien ook die ervaring heeft, zodat ik daarvan kan leren. Je hoeft het ook niet alleen te doen.”

³³ “Hij zei van nou, weet je, wat ik ook doe, hoe ik m'n best ook doe, het is nooit goed. Ik moet altijd veel harder lopen. Toen zei ik ja, je hebt gelijk, het klopt wat je zegt. Ik zei maar ja, het is aan jezelf hoe je ermee omgaat.”

³⁴ “Ik denk haast dat de organisatie dat gewoon overal ademt.”

is working at, organisational support was more implicit and consisted of talking occasionally about how to adapt and respond to certain culturally or ethnically minoritised groups. Furthermore, participant 1 and participant 2 referred to support from colleagues. This concerns colleagues whose cultural and ethnic backgrounds are diverse or similar to those of clients from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups, or colleagues who have knowledge of such groups in another way. Similar to participant 2, participant 1 provided an example of how she was supported by and learned from these colleagues. Therefore, the component of being teachable is closely related to this component.

In discussing cultural competence in relation to general competences, such as competences related to diagnostics and treatment, of child welfare professionals, participant 9 said: “I think being able to adapt to certain target groups is an important characteristic of a professional. Does it always have to be about culture? (...) Culture is part of it, it is one thing that you have to be able to adapt to, but there are more things”.³⁵ In line with this, the majority of participants perceives cultural competence as equal to or part of general competences. In addition, participant 4 emphasised this overlap between cultural competence and general competences by mentioning that in adapting and responding to cultures, ethnicities and associated elements, she also uses her general competences.

4.4 Intersectionality among culturally or ethnically minoritised groups

The majority of participants mentioned and referred to at least one category of identity other than ethnicity and race when working with clients from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups. Their examples and stories contained references to categories as ability, class, migration status, and gender and sexual orientation, but also to categories that they themselves identified as elements of culture and ethnicity, namely nationality and religion. For example, ability mainly related to youth or parents with an intellectual disability and class to families of low socioeconomic status. With regard to migration status, participant 3 provided an example of how this can influence child welfare practice: “Some people who came to the Netherlands through an asylum seekers’ centre are used to not telling everything. So sometimes a child does not know exactly their history and support cannot adapt fully [to the child], because people think well, I am not showing the back of my tongue, because it can be beneficial not to tell

³⁵ “Aan kunnen sluiten bij een bepaalde doelgroep vind ik sowieso een belangrijk kenmerk van een professional. Dan denk ik, moet het altijd per se over cultuur gaan? (...) Cultuur hoort daarbij, dat is iets waarop je moet kunnen aansluiten, maar er zijn meerdere dingen.”

the whole story so that I can stay in the Netherlands”.³⁶ In addition, several participants encountered and referred to gender and sexual diversity, but this was not necessarily related to clients from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups in each case.

Furthermore, the examples and stories of several participants showed simultaneous and interacting effects of different categories of identity as well as related processes and structures of power. Participant 2, who provided the example of differences in treatment of Ukrainian versus Syrian and Eritrean refugees, referred to a combination of migration status and race. In addition, participant 3 exposed the simultaneous and interacting effects of racism and classism by drawing a connection between nationality and class: “Non-Dutch families are sometimes stuck in the lower social classes. While the majority of the people who came here do have fair level of intelligence, they do not get the opportunities”.³⁷ Participant 9 drew a similar connection between migration status and class. Finally, when discussing ethnicity, participant 5 explicitly mentioned processes and structures of power. Although she did not refer to specific categories of identity, it became clear from her story that discrimination and oppression arise from deviating from multiple established norms: “(...) that is being different”.³⁸

Participant 7 told a story that revealed both simultaneous and interacting effects of different categories of identity and how this can create challenges when categories do not match between client and professional. “A girl who has lived with us has FAS [i.e. fetal alcohol syndrome]. She cannot make choices herself and therefore has a lot of trouble with relationships. One day, uh, she is in love with a woman, then she is in love with a man. Or then, all of a sudden, she is on an app with bisexuals. Well, she just does not know”.³⁹ This illustrates an intersection between ability and sexual diversity. In addition, participant 7 explained that she found this difficult to deal with and linked this to her own religion and sexual orientation: “How do I guide and support her? I myself am married, that is what I chose with my husband. (...) Well, then I come upon the point of religion, from my religion it is normal and I think it is very beautiful to have a man, woman, family, taking care of children. From my religion, as

³⁶ “Een aantal mensen die via een azc in Nederland zijn gekomen, hebben zich ook aangewend om niet alles te vertellen. Dus een kind weet soms ook niet precies wat zijn geschiedenis is en hulpverlening kan dan ook niet volledig aansluiten [bij het kind], omdat mensen denken van ja, maar ik laat niet het achterste van m'n tong zien, want het kan voordelen hebben om iets te verzwijgen zodat ik in Nederland kan blijven.”

³⁷ “Niet-Nederlandse gezinnen blijven soms in de lage sociale klassen hangen. Terwijl het merendeel van de mensen dat hier naartoe is gekomen toch wel een behoorlijk intelligentieniveau heeft, maar ze krijgen de kansen dus niet.”

³⁸ “(...) dat is het anders zijn.”

³⁹ “Een meisje dat bij ons heeft gewoond, heeft FAS [i.e. foetaal alcohol syndroom]. Ze kan zelf geen keuzes maken en heeft daardoor heel veel moeite met relaties ook. De ene dag, uh, is ze verliefd op een vrouw, dan is ze verliefd op een man. Of dan ineens zit ze op een app met allemaal biseksuelen. Nou, ze weet het dus gewoon niet.”

the Bible intended”.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, she was aware of possible processes and structures of power that can arise from these differences in categories of identity: “That does not mean I judge anyone, that is one’s own choice so I let that go. But well, that is, well, sometimes that is quite difficult”.⁴¹

⁴⁰ “Hoe stuur ik haar? Ik ben zelf getrouwd, daar heb ik met m’n man voor gekozen. (...) Nou, dan kom ik toch op het stuk geloof hè, vanuit mijn geloof is het gewoon en vind ik heel mooi, man, vrouw, gezin, zorgen voor kinderen. Vanuit mijn geloof, zoals de bijbel het heeft bedoeld.”

⁴¹ “Dat wil niet zeggen dat ik een ander veroordeel, dat is ieders keus dus dat laat ik los. Maar ja, dat is wel, nou, soms is dat best moeilijk.”

5. Conclusion

This study explored the experiences and perspectives of child welfare professionals in the province of Groningen, who are in direct contact with children and families from culturally or ethnically minoritised groups, with regard to cultural and ethnic diversity in their daily work. The theoretical concepts of disproportionality and disparity, cultural competence and intersectionality were used to guide the study. Based on its findings, it can be concluded that cultural and ethnic diversity is an important and recurring theme in the daily work of professionals. They acknowledge both multiple elements of culture and ethnicity, and multiple grounds of minoritisation, hence perceiving the concepts of diversity and minoritised groups as broad. In addition, the findings showed how professionals encountered the concepts of disproportionality and disparity, cultural competence and intersectionality in practice. Although most of them did not recognise disproportionality in practice, they did encounter disparity. In addition, professionals perceive factors or dynamics related to a lack of cultural sensitivity, bias and prejudice, and risk and vulnerability as contributing to these phenomena. Furthermore, when working with culturally or ethnically minoritised clients, professionals combine different components of cultural competence, namely awareness, knowledge, skills, desire, social justice and organisational context. Nevertheless, they also emphasise that overlap exists between cultural competence and general competences of child welfare professionals. Finally, professionals do not perceive culture and ethnicity as the only important categories of identity to take into account when working with culturally or ethnically minoritised clients. With regard to the concept of intersectionality, some professionals shared experiences with simultaneous and interacting effects of ability, class, migration status, and gender and sexual orientation, as well as processes and structures of power among culturally or ethnically minoritised clients.

6. Discussion

6.1 Reflection

With regard to the concepts of culture and ethnicity, the findings revealed that participants focused on several elements, such as beliefs, lifeways, norms and values, intergenerationality, language and religion. This is in line with elements that both Laird and Tedam (2019) and Marsiglia et al. (2021) attribute to these concepts. In addition, participants perceived culture and ethnicity to be closely related or nearly similar, which corresponds to existing literature that describes ethnicity as identification with people who have a similar culture, among others (Laird & Tedam, 2019). In accordance with Sawrikar (2017), several participants also perceived ethnicity to encompass race. Throughout the interviews, race was referred to by mentioning skin colour and minoritisation based on race or skin colour was discussed by the majority of participants. Razack and Jeffery (2002) report that language pertaining to race and racism is frequently erased when the discourse focuses on cultural differences and cultural diversity, which, according to Eldering (2010), is the case in the Netherlands. However, this did not apply to the majority of participants in this study. With regard to participants who made no or less references to race or skin colour throughout the interviews, Kikulwe (2016) argues that a silence on race “appeals to most of us because it is comfortable to ignore this subject” (p.110). Furthermore, he states that “silence on this subject can also appear to mean that nothing has to be done to address the issue” (Kikulwe, 2016, p. 110).

Furthermore, participants in this study perceived minoritisation to be broader than cultural or ethnic minoritisation. Several economic and social factors, such as education, function or occupation, and finances or income, were mentioned by the majority of participants as grounds for minoritisation. This is in line with Selvarajah et al. (2020), who defines minoritised groups as individuals and populations whose cultural, economic, political and social power is eroded. These authors, as well as Gunaratnam (2003) and Milner and Jumbe (2020), furthermore emphasise that minoritised groups are actively minoritised by others. As participants understood minoritised groups as people who are disadvantaged by others, seen differently and treated differently, these power relations also emerged from this study.

With regard to disproportionality and disparity, the findings revealed that the majority of participants did not recognise the phenomenon of disparity. As a participant explained, this may be because of the type of child and youth support organisation that they are working at: “Regardless of the family they come from, their cultural background or their ethnicity, at some point a court will say ‘this child will be removed from their home’. Then they eventually come

to us. So then it is not oh, but those are more Turks or Moroccans or others, no”.⁴² Nevertheless, participants identified factors and dynamics that contribute to disproportionality and disparity of culturally and ethnically minoritised groups which were in line with the ‘bias explanation’ and the ‘differential risk explanation’ by Feely and Bosk (2021). Another theme with regard to contributing factors and dynamics that emerged from the findings was a lack of consideration of culture. A factor related to this theme, namely a lack of cultural sensitivity, was also mentioned and addressed by professionals in previous studies (Antwi-Boasiako, 2020; Miller et al., 2012). Finally, a remarkable finding was the connection that a participant drew between disproportionality and poverty among culturally or ethnically minoritised clients. As Krumer-Nevo (2020) argues, poverty is often not recognised “as a material predicament or an emotional and relational experience” (p. 1) and its interactions with other aspects of minoritisation, for example ethnicity and race, are often not considered in social services in general. Nevertheless, this participant did consider and recognise both.

In addition, the themes related to cultural competence that were found in this study correspond to the components of cultural competence described in existing literature (Balcazar et al., 2009; Bellaart et al., 2018; Campinha-Bacote, 2002; McPhatter, 1997; Marsiglia et al., 2021; Papadopoulos, 2006; Sue, 2001; Van de Haterd et al., 2010). With regard to the component of knowledge, Furlong and Wight (2011) state that cultural competence implies cultural knowledge or literacy among professionals, which can exacerbates power relations between them and their culturally or ethnically minoritised clients. However, this study revealed that although participants indeed identified knowledge as a component of cultural competence, they also valued elements related to desire, humility and sensitivity, such as being teachable, curiosity, flexibility and openness. This may mitigate the power relations that Furlong and Wight refer to. Furthermore, whereas Bellaart et al. (2021) reported that cultural and ethnic diversity are not given enough priority within child welfare organisations and the child welfare system as a whole, the findings of this study showed the opposite. All participants mentioned that within the organisations that they are working at, attention is paid to cultural and ethnic diversity and support is provided with regard to cultural competence.

With regard to intersectionality, participants in this study referred categories of identity other than ethnicity and race when working with culturally or ethnically minoritised clients. This is in line with Marsiglia et al. (2021). These authors argue that besides ethnicity and race,

⁴² “Ongeacht uit welk gezin je komt, wat voor culturele achtergrond of wat voor etniciteit, op een gegeven moment is het zo dat vanuit een rechtbank wordt gezegd “dit kind wordt uit huis geplaatst”. Dan komen ze uiteindelijk bij ons terecht. Dus dan is het niet oh, maar dat zijn meer Turken of Marokkanen of anderen, nee.”

categories such as ability, class, and gender and sexual orientation should be taken into account as well when working with these clients. However, the findings showed limited references to the essence of intersectionality, which consists of considering the simultaneous and interacting effects of different categories of identities as well as the related processes and structures of power. This may be explained by the way in which intersectionality was incorporated in the interviews. The concept was not included and explained as a separate theme, but the related questions were subsumed under the themes of disproportionality and disparity, and cultural competence.

Finally, the findings of this study did not confirm the main findings from previous studies on the experiences and perspectives of child welfare professionals in the Netherlands with regard to culturally or ethnically minoritised clients and cultural and ethnic diversity. These studies found that professionals perceive difficulties in communicating with and reaching immigrant clients. However, this may be explained by differences in target groups of clients. Whereas previous studies mainly focused on immigrants, while participants in this study are working with other culturally or ethnically minoritised clients as well.

6.2 Strengths and limitations

One of the major strengths of this study is that it provides more and renewed insight into the experiences and perspectives of child welfare professionals with regard to cultural and ethnic diversity in the light of several relevant developments, namely the high levels of immigration during the ‘European refugee crisis’, the increase in the proportion of culturally or ethnically minoritised clients in the child welfare system and the introduction of the Child and Youth Act (Alisic & Letschert, 2016; CBS, 2022; López López et al., 2019). In the whole of the Netherlands, only a few studies have been conducted on this topic since these developments took place. Another strength is the use of the concepts of disproportionality and disparity, cultural competence and intersectionality. In doing so, this study both shows how professionals understand these concepts and tests the applicability of these concepts in practice.

In addition to the strengths of this study, there are limitations to be acknowledged. A first limitation of this study is that the majority of participants were affiliated with or working for the same organisation. Although some of them also referred to experiences at other organisations where they work or have worked, this may have influenced the results. Second, as the interviews were conducted in Dutch, the term ‘culturally or ethnically minoritised groups’ was translated. However, in Dutch, there is no common term that covers the meaning of minoritisation. Therefore, the term ‘gemarginaliseerde culturele of etnische minderheden’ was used during the interviews, which is a combination of minorities and marginalisation. Although

the findings show that participants did respond to this term by mentioning power relation and the social that underlie discrimination, domination and oppression, this may have caused minor discrepancies between what was meant in the theoretical exploration and what was studied.

6.3 Recommendations

The findings of this study have implications for child welfare practice. First, the findings indicated that attention was paid to social justice only by discussing minoritisation with culturally or ethnically minoritised clients. Nevertheless, social justice is one of the goals or principles of child welfare practice (Garraan & Rozas, 2013; Marsiglia et al., 2021). Although discussing minoritisation is a first step in the right direction, this component should be given more attention and priority by addressing and challenging minoritisation of culturally and ethnically minoritised clients as well. Furthermore, child welfare organisations should focus more on recruiting and achieving a culturally and ethnically diverse workforce. This issue has been described in previous studies in the Netherlands (Bellaart et al., 2016; Bellaart et al., 2021; Bellaart & Pehlivan, 2011). The findings of this study confirmed that few professionals had colleagues with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds or culturally or ethnically minoritised backgrounds. However, professionals who did have such colleagues described how they learned from and were supported by them.

In addition, recommendations for further research follow from this study. The sample of this study did not include participants who belong to culturally or ethnically minoritised groups themselves. Furthermore, previous studies that explored the experiences and perspectives of culturally and ethnically minoritised groups, with regard to issues of diversity and inequality of clients from these these groups in the child welfare system, mainly focused on those of parents and families (Bellaart & Pehlivan, 2011; Distelbrink et al., 2010), but on professionals. This does not only apply to studies conducted in the Netherlands, but also to studies conducted in different parts of the world (Fong, 2020; Merritt, 2021). Therefore, it may be interesting and informative to explore the experiences and perspectives of culturally or ethnically minoritised child welfare professionals. Furthermore, the ways in which child welfare professionals encounter and take into account the concept of intersectionality when working with culturally or ethnically minoritised clients may be further explored. This can be done by laying more emphasis on this concept when studying cultural and ethnic diversity on the one hand and by conducting studies that focus on this concept solely on the other hand.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Introductie

- Fijn dat u wilt deelnemen aan dit interview
- Voorstellen door de interviewer: studie, interesses, masterscriptie etc.
- Introductie van het onderzoek: Dit onderzoek verkent de ervaringen en perspectieven van jeugdhulpprofessionals in Noord-Nederland met betrekking tot culturele en etnische diversiteit in hun werk, om zo inzicht te verkrijgen in wat diversiteit voor hen en voor hun werk betekent, maar ook in de aansluiting tussen jeugdhulp en (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden. Dit kan mogelijk bijdragen aan het verbeteren van de jeugdhulp aan deze minderheden.
- Introductie van het interview: In dit interview staan daarom uw ervaringen en perspectieven met betrekking tot culturele en etnische diversiteit en (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden in uw werk als jeugdhulpprofessional centraal. Het interview zal ongeveer 30 tot 45 minuten duren en er zullen verschillende thema's aan bod komen die te maken hebben met diversiteit en minderheden. Zoals u weet, wordt er een audio-opname van dit interview gemaakt.
- Tot slot wil ik benadrukken dat u alle tijd mag nemen om over uw antwoorden na te denken en dat geen enkel antwoord fout is. U mag mij altijd onderbreken voor verduidelijking of vragen. Heeft u nog vragen voordat we beginnen?

Informatie over de professional

1. Kunt u iets over uzelf vertellen? *probes: leeftijd; nationaliteit; studie*
2. Hoe lang bent u al werkzaam in de jeugdhulp?
3. Kunt u kort iets vertellen over de organisatie waar u op dit moment werkt?
4. Wat houdt uw functie binnen deze organisatie in? Hoe lang bent u al werkzaam in deze functie?
5. Wat vindt u het leukst aan uw werk?

Cultuur en etniciteit en (gemarginaliseerde) minderheden

Omdat het onderzoek gaat over culturele en etnische diversiteit in de jeugdhulp en het werken met (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden, wil ik deze begrippen of thema's graag met u bespreken.

1. Wat betekent cultuur volgens of voor u? *probes: gewoonten; levenswijzen; normen en waarden; overtuigingen*
2. Wat verstaat u onder etniciteit? *probes: link met cultuur; geloof; roots; taal; link met ras*
3. Zijn cultuur en etniciteit begrippen of thema's die terugkomen binnen uw werk in de jeugdhulp? Op welke manier? Kunt u daar een voorbeeld van geven?
4. Wat is het eerste dat in u opkomt als u aan culturele en etnische diversiteit denkt?
5. Op welke manier speelt culturele of etnische diversiteit een rol in uw werk? Kunt u daar een voorbeeld van geven? *probes: diversiteit onder de cliënten; diversiteit binnen de organisatie*
6. Wat verstaat u onder (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden? Kunt u daar voorbeelden van geven? *probes: aantallen; discriminatie en machtsverhoudingen*
7. Met welke van deze (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden werkt u of heeft u eens gewerkt?
8. Kunt u me iets vertellen over uw ervaringen in de jeugdhulp met kinderen en gezinnen van wie de culturele of etnische achtergrond verschilde van uw eigen achtergrond? Kunt u daar een voorbeeld van geven?

Onevenredigheid (onder- of oververtegenwoordiging) en ongelijkheid

Een ander thema waar ik het graag met u over wil hebben is onevenredigheid en ongelijkheid binnen de jeugdhulp. Onevenredigheid heeft betrekking op onder- of oververtegenwoordiging van bepaalde culturele of etnische groepen in de jeugdhulp of de verschillende vormen hiervan. Ongelijkheid gaat over ongelijke behandeling van verschillende culturele of etnische groepen, bijvoorbeeld met betrekking tot besluitvorming en dienstverlening.

1. Wat is het eerste dat in u opkomt als u hierover nadenkt? Ziet u deze onevenredigheid en ongelijkheid terug binnen de organisatie waar u werkt en in uw werk? Op welke manier? Waarom niet? *probes: wanneer professionals dit niet herkennen, het voorbeeld van Marokkaanse en Turkse jongeren noemen; verhouding tussen cliënten uit (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden en cliënten uit de culturele of etnische meerderheid*
2. Wat draagt volgens u bij aan de onder- of oververtegenwoordiging van bepaalde (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden in de jeugdhulp?
3. Wat zijn volgens u oorzaken van of redenen voor de ongelijke behandeling van (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden in de jeugdhulp?

4. Hoe denkt u over de rol van aspecten en kenmerken van kinderen en gezinnen in onevenredigheid en ongelijkheid? (intersectionaliteit) *probes: kwetsbaarheid en risicofactoren; achtergrondkenmerken als gender, leeftijd, sociaaleconomische status, seksuele geaardheid etc.*
5. Wat is uw mening over de rol van de jeugdhulp of jeugdhulporganisaties in onevenredigheid en ongelijkheid? *probes: bias en discriminatie*
6. Hoe ervaart u het werken met kinderen en gezinnen uit (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden in vergelijking met kinderen en gezinnen uit de culturele of etnische meerderheid? Wat zijn volgens u overeenkomsten en verschillen? *probes: protectieve en risicofactoren; case- en gezinskenmerken; behandeling en dienstverlening*

Culturele competentie

Het laatste thema waarover ik een aantal vragen voor u heb, is culturele competentie.

1. Wat betekent culturele competentie volgens of voor u? Wat houdt het in? Wat zijn belangrijke aspecten? *probes: bewustzijn van en reflectie op eigen achtergrond, houding, overtuigingen en waarden; kennis van verschillende culturele of etnische groepen; openheid en sensitiviteit; vaardigheden*
2. Komt uit culturele competentie tot uiting in uw werk met (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden? Kunt u daar een voorbeeld van geven?
3. Kunt u een aantal voorbeelden noemen van cases of situaties waarin u zich cultureel competent voelde?
4. Hoe heeft uw eigen culturele of etnische achtergrond invloed op uw werk met (gemarginaliseerde) culturele of etnische minderheden? (deels intersectionaliteit) *probes: botsingen en uitdagingen*
5. In hoeverre is er binnen de organisatie waar u werkt aandacht voor culturele competentie? Op welke manier? Vindt u dat u hierin voldoende ondersteund wordt? *probes: aanmoedigingen; beperkingen; richtlijnen*
6. Verschilt culturele competentie volgens u van de algemene competenties die belangrijk zijn voor het werken in de jeugdhulp? Zo ja, op welke manier? Zo nee, waarom niet en wat zijn overeenkomsten?
7. In hoeverre zijn, naast cultuur en etniciteit, ook andere achtergrondkenmerken van belang voor culturele competentie? (intersectionaliteit) *probes: gender; sociaaleconomische status; seksuele geaardheid etc.*

Afsluiting

- Als u nadenkt over het gesprek dat we net hebben gehad, vindt u dat culturele en etnische diversiteit een belangrijke rol speelt in uw werk? Zo ja, waarom? Zo nee, waarom niet? Welke andere aspecten of thema's zijn belangrijker?
- Is er iets wat we nog niet hebben besproken, maar wat u nog graag wilt toevoegen of vertellen?
- Hartelijk bedankt voor uw deelname en tijd

Appendix B: Overview of codes and themes

Table B.1 Overview of codes and themes

Code	Type	Organising theme	Global theme
Beliefs	Deductive		
Country of origin/nationality*	Inductive		
Environment	Deductive		
Intergenerationality	Deductive		
Language	Deductive	Elements of culture and ethnicity	
Lifeways	Deductive		
Norms and values	Deductive		Culture, ethnicity and culturally or ethnically minoritised groups
Physical characteristics/race*	Deductive		
Religion*	Deductive		
Upbringing	Inductive		
Cultural and ethnic minoritisation	Deductive	Minoritisation	
Economic minoritisation	Deductive		
Physical/racial minoritisation	Inductive		
Social minoritisation	Deductive		
Physical characteristics/race*	Deductive	Bias and prejudice	
Unconscious bias and prejudice	Inductive		
Lack of cultural sensitivity	Deductive	Lack of consideration of culture and ethnicity	Disproportionality and disparity
Lack of information	Inductive		
Taboos on help and support	Inductive		
Poverty	Deductive	Risk and vulnerability	
Violence	Deductive		
Letting go of own frame of reference	Inductive	Awareness	
Not engaging in bias and prejudice	Inductive		
Reflecting on own attitudes, beliefs and values	Deductive		
Being teachable	Deductive	Desire, humility and sensitivity	
Curiosity	Inductive		
Flexibility and openness	Deductive		
Respecting and valuing diversity	Deductive		
Knowledge	Deductive	Knowledge	Cultural competence
Organisational support	Deductive	Organisational context	
Support from colleagues	Inductive		
Bonding/working together with clients	Deductive	Skills	
Discussing culture and ethnicity with clients	Inductive		
Helping with differences in norms and values	Inductive		
Understanding clients' behaviour through culture and ethnicity	Inductive		
Discussing minoritisation with clients	Inductive	Social justice	

Table B.1 continued

Code	Type	Organising theme	Global theme
Ability	Deductive		
Class	Deductive		
Country of origin/nationality*	Deductive	Multidimensionality of identity	
Migration status	Deductive		
Physical characteristics/race*	Deductive		
Religion*	Deductive		
Gender and sexual orientation	Deductive		
Classism	Deductive		
Heterosexism	Deductive	Intersectional	
Racism	Deductive	minoritisation	
Religious oppression	Deductive		

Notes: codes marked with * are attributed to multiple themes.