

“Is it Mandatory to Celebrate Birthdays?”

Birthday Parties as a Ritual of Everyday Nationalism in Norway

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“Is it mandatory to celebrate children’s birthdays?” A mother of five with a Somali background asked this question in a parenting class she attended with other parents from East Africa. The mother explained that she experienced a very specific demand from both the kindergarten and school concerning birthdays: that her children should have a celebration. “Why are children with a migration background not attending birthday parties in our children’s classes at school?” A white middle-class mother asked this rhetorically, partly to herself and partly to others, while discussing how to make a more inclusive school environment in a parents’ meeting at a school. During our fieldwork with parents of different class and ethnic background in a diversified area in Bergen, the second largest city in Norway, we noticed that questions about birthday parties were of high concern among both professionals working with children and many differently situated parents. Some parents in our study discussed how to perform it, others whether to do so at all, and many reflected upon expectations concerning guests, gifts and hosts.

A mother with a Somali background asked a neighbour for help on how to organize a birthday party and received a list and explanations that she used. A couple with an Eastern European background told us how they had tried to organize a party “the Norwegian way” and had even surfed the internet for information. But still they had done something wrong: Choosing a date when many Norwegians were on holiday had the result that no guests showed up for their daughter’s party. Parents with a majority background were frequently concerned with the inclusive and exclusive

aspects of birthday parties, underlining that they invited either everybody in the school class, or all the girls or all the boys. They had made sure to make religiously neutral food and tried to keep the expenses for the gifts down, hoping to make the birthday party into an inclusive event. They were also concerned with why some children with a migrant background did not attend birthday parties. Some made a special effort to facilitate for poor children or children with a migration background to join birthday celebrations.

We argue that birthday celebrations are not just private or individualized family matters. They are also symbolic events highlighting important codes of belonging in schools, neighbourhoods and the nations. An increasingly pluralistic society has brought up discussions about birthday celebrations in different arenas. Discussions of birthday parties for children feature in the media, in integration courses aimed at refugees, parenting classes, parent-teachers’ meetings, working committees at schools, and in everyday conversations. In this article, we will draw on conversations about birthday parties which took place at different settings during our fieldwork, as well as interviews with parents and written material such as newspaper articles and public information on websites for education. Media articles expose the way in which birthday celebrations have come to represent ideas of belonging in the nation state, and symbolic events for integration which we believe are also reflected in the ways in which the parents reflect upon and respond to birthday parties in their everyday lives. Media articles also indicate the invisible scripts that parents respond to in their meetings with

birthday celebrations.

Birthday celebrations may be important rituals within families and between parents and children. Children themselves have an independent and crucial role as actors in organizing birthday celebrations, as shown by Scott (2007). Our focus, however, is not on children's experiences of birthday celebrations, but rather on the symbolic value ascribed to birthday celebrations as part of ideas of the individual, collectivity and community. We investigate birthday parties as a ritual of belonging in order to understand broader mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion in Norwegian society. Further, we examine how differently positioned parents and other adults, such as teachers, discuss birthday parties for children, and keep a special interest in investigating how they negotiate ways to respond to the expectations involved. Organizing or attending birthday parties are in many settings in Norway taken for granted rituals with strong scripts. When someone is not following the invisible rules regarding children's birthdays, such everyday happenings become a focus of attention. We will argue that birthday parties for children have become a symbol of Norwegian values and can be interpreted as manifestations of everyday nationalism.

Everyday Nationalism as a Ritual of Belonging

Considering birthday parties as a ritual means that we recognize that the event consists of specific rules and structures that are subject to negotiation and changeable according to specific place and time settings (Scott 2007:96). Rituals are thus suitable for studying cultural and social processes.

Like any rituals, birthday parties bring along tacit but important, social practices and expectations through which these events should be performed. The codes are often implicit, and they are not shared by all, for example, due to class differentiations or ethnic background. As a consequence of migration and new ways of parenting and upbringing in Norwegian society, we see an increasingly heated public discussion about the ritual of birthday parties for children.

Although children's birthday parties are frequently discussed in the popular press, as we will investigate later in this article, and the ritual is an inherent part of Western popular culture (Otnes & McGrath 1994), they have received only limited research attention. Within the fields of Nordic cultural studies, formerly named ethnology and folkloristics, there is a continual interest in everyday and sacred rituals. Birthday parties are interpreted as a ritual developing historically, underlining individuality and the individual's life course (Frykman & Löfgren 1979:37). Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren place birthday celebrations as emerging rites de passage in bourgeois environments in modern times. Such celebrations became more widespread and common among working-class people after the Second World War, following the economic growth and prosperity made available to common people.

Two studies by Erika Scott (1999; 2007) focus on birthdays parties as a ritual for children in Norway, within a multicultural context. Both studies are based on fieldwork and interviews with children, highlighting their experiences with birthday celebrations. The last publication also co-

vers the parents' perspectives. Scott concludes that laying on a birthday celebration for one's child, including a party, has become a critical part of parenting obligations. For most majority parents and many migrant parents, celebrating birthday for their child is a habituated and naturalized part of parenting (ibid.).¹ Scott underlines that the performance of birthday parties carries strong normative expectations, which are also about social relations, socialization and class (ibid.). The Swedish ethnologist Helene Brembeck has studied how birthdays are part of the commercialization of childhood in the Swedish context (Brembeck 2007), and the development of commercial playgrounds as places for birthday celebrations has also been investigated within social sciences (McKendrick et al. 2000).

Earlier research on birthday celebrations and parties in social sciences more broadly has taken up different perspectives and thematic issues. Scholars have studied how children are socialized in their participation in the ritual of birthday parties in the USA, with gendered differences (Otnes & McGrath 1994). The sociologist Michael Windzio (2012) has examined how birthday parties in Germany are embedded in social networks of trust, and considers attending birthday parties as an action based upon having or building trust. Windzio finds that birthday celebrations affect majority and minority children in different ways, as minority children are less interwoven in exchanges of birthday parties than majority children (ibid.). Other researchers have focused on the complicated role of gift exchange in birthday celebrations, and the quest for equality, for instance analysing

the pressure on mothers to buy the right gift and arrange the appropriate party in the UK (Clarke 2007).

The concept of everyday nationalism provides perspectives that shed light on the symbolic role of the ritual of the birthday party. Everyday nationalism is concerned with the masses and human agency within nationalism studies to consider the role and relevance of the lived experience of nationalism, from a bottom-up approach (Knott 2015). It focuses on the agency of ordinary people, as participants and users of national symbols, rituals and identities, as opposed to elites. Collective rituals in everyday life is a common object of research within studies that examine everyday nationalism (Skey 2011). The concept of everyday nationalism is developed in relation to the influential concept of banal nationalism, coined by Billig to highlight that nationalism pertains to personal and group identities in the West (Billig 1995). Billig introduced the term to show how nationalism is produced by people in everyday lives through forms that are not always visible and have become naturalized and are considered innocent. Nationalism, Billig shows, is produced through the media by means of mundane symbols and conventional language. The term everyday nationalism focuses more on human agency than banal nationalism, and gives an empirical lens to understand the lived experience of nationalism (Knott 2015:1). There is a distinction between banal and everyday nationalism as stated by Fox and van Ginderachter (2018): whereas banal nationalism considers implicit forms of nationalism, focusing in particular on the role of media and language, everyday nationalism is more about every-

day practices. Hearn and Antonsich (2018), argue that the banal and the everyday nationalism approach should be combined in studies of nationalism in order to capture both unspoken norms and practices. In this study, although taking these discussions into account, we rely on the concept of everyday nationalism as we think it entails both norms and practices.

According to the American sociologist Bart Bonikowski, everyday nationalism should be studied in so-called "settled" times, for instance in stable modern democracies, and not only in moments of fundamental institutional crisis (Bonikowski 2016:424). This is a way to understand latent tensions pre-existing or succeeding periods of shocks to the nation. The research strategy involves understanding dispositions towards the nation as relational, intersubjective, morally and affectively laden and mostly taken for granted (ibid. 429). Everyday nationalism has a tendency to become visible when breaches of ordinary but otherwise unspoken rules of social intercourse take place (Fox 2017:31). This includes when breaches at the borders of the national happen, or in everyday life, for instance if taken-for-granted rituals, rules and norms are infringed (Fox 2017).

The concept of everyday nationalism fits very well with the research agenda in Nordic cultural studies, with the effort to study everyday life and practices and explore the diverse meanings specific actors give to cultural phenomena. In the 1990s several ethnologists began to focus on how nationalism developed and was created in everyday life, by ordinary people, within a Swedish context (Ehn, Frykman & Löfgren 1993). Billy Ehn, Jonas Frykman and Orvar

Löfgren focused in different ways on how national identity is rooted in everyday routines and rituals. This research gained a lot of interest and was followed up broadly. Frykman moved on in the 2000s to include affects and feelings as research objects in the study of nationalism, also in line with how everyday nationalism is perceived.

The social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad saw a strong link between children and nation building in Norway (Gullestad 1996); children carry the Norwegian flag on national celebrations and the Norwegian flag is often included as part of birthday celebrations for children. Her argument about children and youth as carriers of the values of the nation is important to bear in mind. Within everyday nationalism studies, some researchers focus in particular on the role of children in everyday nationalism (Millei 2019:20). The educationalist Zsuzsa Millei investigates how children perform the nation, and from a young age learn how to sense who "we" are in contrast to who "they" are (2019:85). Millei shows that children enact the nation in institutional settings such as kindergartens and schools (Millei 2019, 2014). In such institutional settings, national forms of knowledge, practices and emotions naturalize specific notions of the world (Skeggs 2011). Children's birthday parties are often planned and organized within the framework of schools, and educational institutions play an important part in creating and repeating scripts for birthday celebrations.

In Norway, as in other Scandinavian countries, everyday nationalism must be read within the context of egalitarianism. Studying the everyday life of the working class in particular, Gullestad (1984) ex-

plored the concept of "egalitarian individualism". Drawing on the scholarship of Dumont, Gullestad argued that in a range of social contexts the dominant code of behaviour emphasizing equality in status was a pragmatic one: it was more about partners making each other similar over the course of interactions than about an objective form of equality. Gullestad's analytical term "equality as sameness" has become essential to understand the enactment of "Norwegianness" (Gullestad 2002). Being considered as similar is a precondition for being treated as equal (Olwig 2011). At the core of the argument is that in a society such as Norway where being considered as similar is a prerequisite to be treated as equal, there will be an effort to invite newcomers to adapt to everyday ways of life in Norway and an expectation that they should do so in a similar way. In our fieldwork we found a strong commitment from many parents and professionals to make sure that birthday parties were arranged in what they themselves viewed as an inclusive manner.

Presentation of Cases, Methods and Material

Bergen, Norway, where this study took place, is a relatively medium-sized European city (300,000) – and second largest in Norway. In 2015 almost 15 percent of its population were immigrants from 164 out of 192 countries ratified by the UN. The borough of Årstad, where we have pursued fieldwork, has a mixed population. It caters to both the middle class and social-housing clientele, highly skilled labourers and a growing number of high skilled and low-skilled migrants, and it has the highest number of non-Western migrants in Bergen.

Ethnic diversity is a recent social phenomenon, with growing numbers of migrants from the 1990s and especially from the 2000s, and the ways to deal with it are currently enfolding. Both the local municipality and national bodies currently view this area as vulnerable due to a high level of child poverty.

This article draws on qualitative fieldwork and interviews from the study "Parenting Cultures and Risk Management in Plural Norway" (2014–2017), which examined how migration and increased class differences bring differentiations and the co-existence of different ideas of parenting in the same place. We conducted fieldwork and interviews at three different schools where we pursued observation during teacher-parents' meetings in the beginning of the school year (first to sixth year), parent committee meetings at schools and events where parents were invited to the schools. We also followed neighbourhood initiatives and welfare state interactions – including at state-funded parenting class in the areas. We conducted formal, open-ended, audio-taped interviews with participants, sometimes in their own homes, other times at a neutral place. In a few cases, we made use of an interpreter.

We conducted a total of 45 interviews, each lasting between one and three hours, with parents (middle-class and working-class, non-migrant Norwegians and migrants) living in the three different neighbourhoods in Årstad.² Informants were recruited through meetings and activities at schools that we attended, through the snowball method, and through various leisure and neighbourhood activities where we met parents living in the area. We asked

about their parenting practices and ideals, including their views of schooling, the relationship to the neighbourhood, and what they meant by being "a good parent". During our interviews, we had an open approach to the field – asking similar questions to everybody, while ensuring that our sample included parents with a variety of class and migration backgrounds. All names in this article are anonymized, in line with ethical guidelines for research ethics.¹

In this article, we mostly rely on settings where birthdays were discussed spontaneously, and even in the interviews talk of birthdays mostly occurred when the interviewees themselves brought up the topic. The diverse settings we encountered gave us a broad understanding of performances and discussions of parenting by diverse actors, such as parents with and without a migrant background, and different professionals. We have also used the newspaper archive Retriever to find newspaper articles covering birthday celebrations for children in the time period around our fieldwork, in 2015 and 2016. We used the search words "birthday parties" and "birthday celebrations", which led us to a controversial public debate about birthday parties which we use as one case in the analysis of the media representation of birthday parties. We chose this particular case because it covered many different actors on both the local and national level and it dealt with the issue of migrant children and birthday parties from a range of different perspectives.

We had not included the theme of birth-

days or the perspective of everyday nationalism when we designed our research project or methods. During our fieldwork on how parenting was performed and discussed by diverse actors in different arenas, birthday parties were a recurring topic brought up by different actors, including teachers, social welfare representatives, and parents with and without a migrant background. We encountered both similar and different reflections among majority and minority parents and professionals. Considering birthday parties as a ritual and thus part of the social construction of reality, we found that this activity, like other social activities, can be experienced in multiple ways by diverse actors and observers. The data we analyse for this article are based on our rereading of our fieldnotes and interviews, where we discovered different meanings that different actors attributed to birthday celebrations and observed the different settings where discussions about birthday parties had occurred. We are not in a position to use class as a clear-cut category in this article; while we came to know some of the informants intimately during our fieldwork, other informants we met only once during different parent or school meetings, and we have less background information about them.

Public Discussions: Showcasing Otherwise Invisible Strict Norms of Integration

Several official websites of educational institutions present birthday parties as crucial to participate in to integrate into everyday life in Norway. Some civil society organizations in Norway also offer help in organizing birthday parties to poor families

¹ (<https://www.etikkom.no/en/ethical-guidelines-for-research/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences--humanities-law-and-theology/>).

and families with a migrant background, such as the *Resource Centre Unik* (Frivillig 2019), which helps organize birthday celebrations for children in poor families (<https://frivillig.no/ressurscenteret-unik-1>). The expectations in Norway to celebrate in a certain way is strong. For example, the *Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training* (Udir) gives advice on how to organize birthday celebrations on their website, when addressing parents and writing about how grown-ups can help create friendship and inclusion among the pupils (Udir 2019). Under the heading "Perform an inclusive birthday policy" (ibid.) they advice parents to invite whole groups, for instance the whole school class, or all the boys or all the girls within the school class, to celebrations. The argument is that "leaving someone behind or outside is a common form of bullying" (ibid.). They also urge parents to "talk to your children and explain to them why it is important to invite more children than they usually play with" (ibid.). This way the welfare state constitutes parents and birthday children as citizens responsible for creating inclusive events, and for preventing isolation and harassment from happening. *The National Board for Parents* (FUG), which represents parents who have children in elementary schools in Norway, closely follows up this strategy (FUG 2019, sending the same message as Udir, adding that parents should discuss the organization of birthdays and the price of the gifts at parents' meetings at schools (ibid.). The aim of promoting values such as inclusion and equality is clear. A poster about inclusion is made, highlighting ten ways parents may contribute to a good school environment (FUG 2019). One

piece of advice is the following: "Cooperate with the other parents about common rules regarding birthdays and other parties. Make sure that nobody is kept outside" (ibid.). The formulation makes it clear that birthday parties are a self-evident part of the school environment.

Birthday parties for children are a topic that reoccurs in Norwegian media. Newspaper articles giving advice on birthday menus typically claim: "It does not have to be difficult to make sure that all children are included", presenting a halal-based allergy-friendly menu (*Aftenposten* 10 May 17). Another article advised on "how to invite Muslims on birthdays" (*Vårt Land* 17 January 2016), again presenting birthday parties as an event of possible inclusion. Norwegian media regularly also cover stories where children have experienced that nobody came to their birthday celebration or children who never received invitations to such celebrations (*Bergens Tidende* 7 June 2016). Such mediated stories highlight birthday parties as events of bullying as well as how social inclusion has failed.

Norwegian voices, with and without a migration background, have discussed birthday parties publicly, with an understanding of how this has posed a challenge for integration in recent years. During the period when we did our fieldwork, an imam claimed in an interview in a local newspaper that it was *haram* (prohibited or religiously unclean) to celebrate birthdays for Muslims, both grown-ups and children. He argued that such celebrations were not mentioned in the Koran or the Hadith and were thus against the Islamic religion (*Fædrelandsvennen* 13 January 2016). This local statement caused a national media

outburst and led to a heated national debate. Several public figures with a Muslim or migrant background approached social and journalistic media to defend birthday celebrations. Chaudry, a well-known left-wing politician with a Pakistani background, said:

To deny children the possibility to celebrate birthdays is not only to deny them an innocent and true pleasure, but it is also very harmful for a normal and understanding of co-existence in a pluralistic society (*Utrop* 15 January 2016).

Chaudry further focused on children's rights to take part in this ritual and linked acceptance of birthday celebrations to ideals of how one should live together in a diverse society (*ibid.*). Abid Raja, representing a liberal party, a prominent member of Parliament and with a Pakistani background, encouraged Muslims to turn their backs on the message from the imam and celebrate birthdays with joy and pride, arguing:

The fight over values in Norway is about how we should live together and have common norms and common arenas. Children who eat, play and celebrate together at birthdays are not only creating joy, but it is also good integration in practice (*Aftenposten* 17 January 2016).

This media controversy about birthdays highlights not only current disagreements within Muslim communities in Norway concerning questions of upbringing, religion and integration. It also suggests how children's birthdays have become part of a larger discussion on norms, values and ideas of how to live together. The case also made Norwegian majority society's views

on birthday parties very visible. The mayor of Kristiansand went public and asked the mosque for a meeting with the imam, "to discuss integration in Norwegian society" (*Dagbladet* 16 January 2016). The statement from the imam was framed as unacceptable in the national media debate that followed.

The Secretary of State in the Department for Justice, Jøran Kallmyr, representing the far-right Progress Party said: "It is negative that we have imams that work against integration. I urge the imam to reconsider. [...] Imams should learn Norwegian values and, not least, gain an understanding of Norwegian society" (*Aftenposten* 14 January 2016). Birthday parties were equated with Norwegian values and allowing children to take part in birthday celebrations seemed like an obligation. A member of Parliament from the Conservative Party, Hårek Elvenes, added: "This is completely unheard of. To prevent children from attending birthday parties is a perverse way of performing religion that affects the children. This way, distance and delusions between groups are created. It instigates parallel societies. This is what we need least of all. This is an anti-integration measure" (*Aftenposten* 14 January 2016).

To prevent children from attending birthday celebrations is here considered as an act through which you define yourself as outside the Norwegian community, with no interest in integrating or following dominant norms and values in Norwegian society. This member of Parliament exposes a fear of migrants and what failure of integration may lead to, by bringing up the idea of parallel societies. A National Child Authority spokesman at the time stated, with

reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that "children have a right to be heard in all questions regarding them, also regarding birthdays" (*Nettavisen* 17 January 2016). He encouraged parents to ask and listen to their children when it came to birthday parties. The case was highly publicized in national media, and in the end the imam had to withdraw from his position in the mosque (TV2 14 April 2016). It was obviously not acceptable to publicly claim that children should not attend birthday parties. This mediated case made visible a strong interlinkage between birthday parties for children and national ideas of inclusion, exclusion and integration, where birthday parties became symbols of Norwegian ways of life.

Birthday Parties as Tools for "Tolerance" or Inclusion?

Schools were an important context for organizing the guest list for birthday parties, within the framework of the school class a child belongs to. In some contact meetings between schools and parents that we attended, teachers would advise parents to make common rules for the birthday celebrations. Parents would frequently raise the question of how to celebrate birthdays at their specific school or class. Birthday parties, although organized and held outside the realm of education, were thus seen as events that were legitimately discussed in public in schools. Some teachers in our fieldwork informed the parents that they were only allowed to distribute invitations to birthday parties in the school environment if everybody in the class or everybody belonging to the same gender in the class was invited.

A teacher telling first-time school parents

about the practicalities in the cooperation between the school and home on their child's first day in school, went from talking about reading, homework, behaviour, and breakfast to address the organization of birthdays. She clearly had parents with a migrant background in mind when talking about birthday parties, as most of the information she gave may be considered as common knowledge in Norwegian society. During the meeting, she informed that it is important to invite all boys or all girls in a class and to provide feedback to the hosts when your child is invited to a party. The teacher confessed that she gets a stomach-ache when people do not give notification that their child will not attend the birthday, adding, "It is very painful when children do not come to birthdays", referring to the situation both of children who experience that guests do not come, and of children not allowed to go to parties. "In my opinion, if you are invited, then go", the teacher said. The teacher then addressed economic obstacles to participating, and advised the parents to agree upon a low maximum sum for the gifts, in order to prevent the gifts from becoming too expensive. However, much of this information was not translated to parents with a migrant background in this meeting, as the interpreter was by then exhausted by the amount of information the teacher gave. What the non-Norwegian-speaking parents understood from this information was thus unclear; they did not comment on the information. Judging from our conversations with the parents with a migrant background in that particular class (more than half of the parents), many of them were not able to understand what the teacher was saying.

One of the evening meetings for parents was arranged by a school where parents were invited to discuss how they could contribute to a better school environment. At this event, one of the sessions concerned in particular how parents with a migrant background could become more involved in different activities. During this discussion on inclusion and integration, as we also experienced other places and times, the conversation soon touched on the theme of birthday celebrations. A Norwegian majority mother seemed annoyed with parents who did not send their children to birthday parties. She said: "I feel sorry for the children who are denied the chance to go to birthday parties. We want the best, we want to give! But the communication cannot be only one-sided." She referred to her son's class where more than half of the children had a migrant background. She criticized parents for letting their own and other children down by forbidding them to go or by not facilitating their attendance at birthday parties. In her view, those hosting parties gave something to others, just by inviting them. Other parents continued the discussion, bringing up similar experiences. In a later interview with this particular mother, she explained how she prioritized very hard to save money in order for her child to host a birthday party. They lived in precarious economic conditions, and the boy had to prioritize which birthday parties he would attend, as they could not afford to have him going to all the parties he was invited to.

Many remarked on how arranging birthday parties for their children at this school posed some challenges, such as uncertainty about how many to set the table for and the amount of food they should prepare, since

they often were not notified by the children's parents whether or not the child would participate. Another mother interjected, with a disappointed voice: "It is part of having children in this school, setting the table for everybody and then taking the cutlery away." Some parents added that their children had felt let down because only a few children came to their party, and the invited absentees had not given prior notification. Other majority parents seemed particularly happy to say that in their children's class almost everybody came to the parties, also mentioning that this was a consequence of a specific effort. Majority Norwegians had for instance ensured Muslim parents personally that they would not serve pork to their children. Some parents would specifically call or text parents with a migrant background beforehand, asking whether their child was coming, and sometimes offering to bring their children along in their car to other children's parties. To focus on the inclusion of migrants and level out social differences was a common trait among parents engaged in public bodies in this school (Danielsen & Bendixsen 2019).

Maria, a Norwegian majority middle-class mother who was very engaged in her children's schooling and leisure activities, was among those who had "done something extra to try to involve them in birthday celebrations". "Them" were in this case parents and children with a Muslim background. Maria had experienced that half of the guests did not show up at her children's celebrations, and she remarked that all of those not attending had a Muslim background. At first, her children had been sad, but later they had accepted that "this is how it is". Maria, however, tried to find out why

these children did not come, in order to understand what she could do in order to make them come. She said:

One year I asked the teacher if she knew why they were not allowed to attend. Couldn't they afford it? Because, for example, they can join in with the gifts my children are giving. So I have tried to figure it out, how we can include everybody. But it is not that easy, no. Now, I have spent a lot of energy thinking about what we can do to include all the groups belonging to the school, discussed it with other class representatives. But we have sort of not found a good solution, nor has the school. We can see that when we see who attends parents' meetings. So I really do not know what I can do.

For Maria, trying to include children with different backgrounds in birthday celebrations was an integrated part of her engagement in her children's everyday life and school environment, and her effort to include minorities in activities in the neighbourhood. Pursuing this issue further, she had asked some parents with a Muslim background why their children did not attend birthday parties. They had explained that it was not allowed because it could take the focus away from Allah. Telling us this during the interview, she stresses that on the other hand some Muslim families did let their children take part, explaining that two children with a Muslim background usually came to her children's celebrations. Nonetheless, these two children had not attended other children's birthdays, the reason for which she didn't know. One reason, she reflected, was perhaps that their parents trusted her more than other parents in the class, because she had been in direct contact with them. The engagement of Maria, try-

ing to find out why some children did not attend birthday parties, and her effort to find ways to promote the inclusion of all children in the school class in birthday celebrations, was a trait we found among other parents too.

For majority parents, birthday parties carried an expectation that children can meet across differences, an ideal some Norwegian majority parents living in these socially mixed areas held high (Danielsen & Bendixsen 2019). In the guest list, it is not socially acceptable to discriminate on the grounds of economic or ethnic background; on the contrary, one should especially make sure that "everyone" should be invited. Thus, what is sometimes viewed as an event and act focusing on an individual child, in practice is tied up to community building and collectivity – highlighting that the individual child is part of a community. As part of our fieldwork, we have investigated how parenting, for some, also incorporates *inclusive parenting* (Danielsen & Bendixsen 2019). This entails not only a responsibility towards their own child, but a concern for and time investment in other people's children ((Bendixsen & Danielsen 2018). This parenting style is linked to a desire to create a more egalitarian society, and a belief that a child's upbringing and future depends upon the well-being of other people's children. It is against this background, we argue, that the parent's emphasis on everyone celebrating birthday parties, and of attending other children's parties, should be understood.

Critical Self-Reflection and New Practices

At one of the parents' meetings we attended

at one of the schools, a discussion on how to reach out to parents who were not present in school meetings turned into a conversation about the possible reasons why some immigrants, mentioning Muslims, did not send their children to birthday parties or arrange parties for their birthdays. The parents wondered if birthday parties involved too high costs because of the socially expected gifts, if the higher number of children in these families made attendance difficult to organize, or if they did not appreciate birthdays.

Later during this parents' meeting, a white middle-class majority father became more critical towards the idea of birthday parties, saying: "Birthdays are so important to us; they may not be so important to them. They may not be able to invite others to a birthday party." Other parents commented that they ("the Muslims") may see the world with different glasses. The father continued:

What is the purpose of the birthday party, should children really get that much attention? We are so engaged as parents, maybe too engaged. Those who come here [to Norway as migrants or refugees] do not have that engagement, the close follow-up with GPS and attending every [soccer] training session.

This father was very critical towards a standard of parenting which he identified as typically Norwegian: much weight on fostering the individuality of the child, being very concerned with giving much attention to the child. Instead of letting the discussion about birthday parties be about the others and their so-called unwillingness to integrate, he turned the discussion around, to become introspective about "themselves"

and their own parenting focus. He urged that Norwegian parents should learn from people like his neighbours, the Iraqi family who let their 8-year-old daughter cycle around outdoors on her own. "They show us who we are – the helicopter parents", he added and criticized the risk-conscious Norwegian style of child rearing. The parents' discussion on ways of inclusion and birthday parties turned into a self-reflection on what they considered as Norwegian values, namely the engaged ever-present risk-conscious parents attentive to their offspring. This self-reflection may be interpreted as a willingness to understand and accept why others act differently than oneself.

Some parents told us that they had changed the way they celebrated birthdays due to living in a socially and ethnically mixed area. They had tried to take the perceived economic differences between families into account and organized it so that the birthday child only got one joint present from all the children in the class attending the party. This solution both suited the middle-class parent who could avoid cheap plastic things, and it helped to make invisible the economic differences between families, at least in the gift-giving moment.

Some Migrant Parents' Views: A Necessary Custom?

The migrant parents we met through fieldwork, or interviewed, revealed very different views and experiences of birthday celebrations. We encountered families with a migrant background who took birthday celebrations for granted, a few who thought that birthday celebrations were a Christian tradition and thus *haram* (ritually unclean

or prohibited), families who wanted to take part in this ritual as a way to integrate into their neighbourhoods, and families who organized birthday celebrations in order to make their children happy. We will now dig into a separate part of the fieldwork consisting of a group of parents with a migrant and religious background often mentioned by majority parents as a category of parents that did not take part in birthday celebrations.

During our fieldwork, we participated in a parenting class for migrant parents and their discussions of birthday celebrations. It was an official parenting class organized by a local mosque with funding from the local municipalities. This specific parenting class aimed especially at empowering parents with a migration background in their role as parents in a new country. The ten participants all had a migrant background from East Africa. The main course leader was a representative from the local mosque, certified by Norwegian authorities to hold this particular kind of parenting class. There was also a course leader with a Norwegian non-migrant background. One of the researchers took part in this setting, observing the interactions and discussions. The participants in the parenting class had a long debate about whether they should accept a researcher in the setting, and they decided it was fine, partly because some of the parents already knew the researcher from other parts of the fieldwork and ensured the others that the researchers did not belong to government's child welfare service.

The setting appeared to the researcher as a safe space for the mothers and fathers participating in the parenting class, as migrant parents dominated the group. The

atmosphere was very friendly and light-hearted, with lots of laughter. Participants could talk in their mother tongue while parts of the discussion took place in Norwegian or were interpreted by the course leader. Birthday parties were discussed twice during the nine afternoon classes and the woman quoted at the beginning of this article, asking whether birthday parties were mandatory, took part in these classes. The first time birthdays were brought up, the group discussed whether it was difficult to switch between two cultures as parents. A mother then answered: "Yes, with Christmas, and Christmas gifts, and birthdays." A father followed up to confirm what she had said: "Birthdays, they are not a custom in my country, and it is challenging."

The course leader, who had a migration background, presented birthday celebrations as a Norwegian custom that parents had to deal with one way or the other, as it was a phenomenon they would encounter. Some of the parents talked about birthday parties as an event that seemed foreign and distant to them. They had not celebrated their own birthdays when they grew up, and birthday celebrations were not important to them. A mother said that birthdays were not important to her, but she made celebrations for her children's sake because it was important to them. Another mother said she felt pressure from her children to arrange birthday parties, and that once her son cried because she had forgotten his birthday. The boy had noticed this when he arrived in the kindergarten and the kindergarten employees had planned a celebration for him. This example also suggests that not celebrating birthdays in Norway is difficult, as the majority

society expect a celebration, and the kindergarten and school will mark the day for the individual child anyhow. In this case, the kindergarten can be said to take over the role of the parents, providing the child with a celebration.

Some of the parents present said they were against birthday celebrations due to their religious belief, stating that such celebrations would take attention away from Allah. One father showed the researcher photos on his smartphone of the birthday parties his family had hosted, and eagerly pointed out that Norwegian majority children were also present as guests in their home during these parties. Yet he did not share this information with the other parents. The course leader wrapped up the discussion by saying that birthday parties are a tricky question – suggesting simultaneously that it nonetheless could be a valuable way to interact with their neighbours.

The second time they discussed birthday parties in the parenting class, the debate was initiated by the researcher who was present. The course leader asked the researcher if it was something she wanted to discuss with the class on the last night of the nine classes. The researcher suggested talking about birthday parties once more, as she felt that there were more to be said about the issue than time had allowed in the past discussion. The researcher brought up the way Norwegian majority parents in the area viewed and discussed birthday parties. She told them how majority parents felt sorry for their own children when invited guests did not show up, and they were curious as to why some parents did not facilitate such celebrations for their children. This second discussion evolved in new di-

rections after this direct quest for answers. The parents now came up with economic and practical arguments against attending birthdays, which had not been mentioned in the first discussion. Now many of them said that they had so many children, some had five, others seven, and so it would be extremely expensive to let all of them host or attend birthday parties. A mother of seven said that it would be economically and practically impossible if each of her children should attend and give presents to all the parties they were invited to. Many, and probably most, of these parents lived in social housing and identified openly as poor during other discussions in the parenting class.

Others parents commented that it was too difficult to plan and organize their children's attendance at birthday celebrations due to their practical responsibility to look after their other children at home, or to difficulties connected to not having a car to transport their children to the various settings. A father said that because they could not afford to celebrate their own children's birthdays it felt wrong to let their children attend other children's parties. His explanation for not letting his children attend birthday parties thus had more to do with his self-respect and a wish to not feel or be seen as inferior to other families who were more well-off.

Some parents who had seemed reluctant in the first discussion on birthdays, now admitted to also organizing birthday celebrations. A mother of three explained that she herself enjoyed celebrating her children's birthdays, but she made sure to do it the day before or after their real birthdays in order to honour Allah first. During the cof-

fee-break some of the parents showed the researcher photos on their smartphones of birthday cakes and happy birthday children surrounded by guests. Overall, these parents talked about birthdays as a Norwegian custom and taking part in them as something they did for their kids, who wanted this, rather than for themselves or as a way to get to know Norwegian parents in their neighbourhood. As such, they negotiated and changed everyday practices in their family life in order to fulfil their children's wishes. Looking at how this small group of parents with a somewhat similar social, ethnic and religious background encountered birthday celebrations and expectations, strikingly different views and practices became visible.

Discussion: Birthday Parties as a Litmus Test for Belonging in Norwegian Society

The open qualitative research design of this study, based on fieldwork and interviews with open-ended questions, allowed us to follow up on what parents and others in a socially and ethnically mixed area were concerned with. The inclusion of socially differently situated majority parents and migrant parents of different economic and educational background gave a possibility to analyse what differently situated actors talked about. During our fieldwork, it became clear that the issue of birthday celebrations as a topic was discussed in different ways across social, economic and ethnic differences. Why did birthday parties for children cause so much engagement, hope, anxiety, frustration and discussions? To understand the centrality of the ritual of birthday celebrations for children in every-

day interactions, the perspective of everyday nationalism is useful.

Throughout this article, we have argued that birthday parties for children are represented in the media, through major institutions and in everyday talk among majority parents as a naturalized and taken-for-granted occurrence in childhood in Norway. The importance of birthday celebrations for children is not questioned, and the underlying premise seems to be that all children should have the opportunity to experience the same attention on their birthdays as other children do. For many Norwegian majority parents their individual child's happiness and fulfilment of expectations is in focus when arranging birthday celebrations. However, simultaneously at stake is their child's social position in the larger community: the birthday party is also about creating and maintaining social networks and friendships. The latter is why parents describe it as a tragedy if few or no guests come – through such events loneliness, lack of friends and social position becomes established, noticeable and affirmed.

Taken-for-granted rituals, norms and practices are typical features of everyday nationalism. Not facilitating birthday celebrations is interpreted as breaking unspoken rules of conduct in Norway, and this draws attention. In the media debate it was even considered as an act of anti-integration or a signal of developing parallel societies. In media debates we saw an equation between birthday parties and Norwegian ways of life. Supporting or not supporting birthday parties becomes an invisible litmus test of whether you belong, or wish to belong, in Norway or not. Migrant children and their parents become objects of nationalization

into Norwegian rituals. The Swedish sociologists Åkerblom and Harju (2019:1), also using everyday nationalism as a perspective, argue that migrant children in Sweden are fostered to become "Swedish" in the preschool setting to integrate them into Swedish society. Their research shows that preschool education mediates dominant culture to migrant children and they "are being compensated for lack of assumed national identity" (ibid. 2019:11). Our study shows, in a similar way, how birthdays are educational tools used by teachers and other professionals and parents to integrate children into Norwegian society.

Majority parents talked about birthday parties as social arenas where every child should be included. Some had an ideal that special measures should be taken in order to include migrant and poor children, such as negotiating prices of the gifts in advance to make reciprocity possible. By framing the organization of birthday parties as part of anti-bullying strategies that may encourage inclusion in school classes and neighbourhoods, such parties become part of preventing children from becoming marginalized. Birthday parties are seen as potential meeting points between children who otherwise do not spend time together outside of school. The inclusionary aims that are linked to birthday parties in the sense that "everyone should be included", as expressed by some parents, can be a response to anxieties: if some children today are marginalized and excluded – or excluding themselves, this can make inclusion in Norwegian society more difficult tomorrow. Birthday parties are thus seen as events where it is important to include everybody and the effort to ensure that nobody

is left out is often framed as part of an anti-bullying strategy. As such, inclusion measures such as birthday parties can be interpreted as risk management, with an effort to solve anxieties related to integration, both in the present and in the future. Children attending in birthday parties become citizens, seen as expressing normative standards and symbolizing ideals for how to live together in Norway today.

Minority parents had different ways of responding to the birthday ritual in Norway and its tacit rules: from embracing it as an ordinary event in their children's lives, to struggling with being able to perform this ritual, to being critical against the idea of birthday celebrations. In contrast to how many majority parents talked about the celebration of birthdays, some of the migrant parents understood the ritual as situating the individual in focus (the birthday child) – an individual event in which one person receives a lot of attention and thus it became religiously problematic for some. Additionally, the focus on how they should deal with their children's birthdays may for some be experienced as a trespassing of their private lives. The detailed norms regarding how you should perform the party, such as having to include all members of a school class or all boys or girls in the class, or serving specific food, are intended to make the party inclusive. But for some families such rules can mean that it becomes too overwhelming or difficult to host such a party due to lack of space in their home or lack of knowledge about the food expected to be served.

Majority parents' disappointment when some migrant children did not attend such events may also reflect an anxiety of paral-

lel societies and express a potential fear of too large difference in lifestyles and religious beliefs. Bringing your child to other children's homes requires a certain degree of trust, of believing that the other parents will show proper care and respect that your child has a certain diet, for instance. It may be that the Norwegian majority parents feel that they are not trusted when other parents will not let their children visit them. For some, it might appear as if arranging inclusive birthday parties is a gift that the migrant parents do not recognize or are unwilling to take on.

Frykman has claimed that national identity, rightly viewed as a dangerous force of exclusion, can also, under certain circumstances, serve as a tool in the service of cultural complexity – not homogenization – and can contribute to negotiations and deeper reflexivity (1995). This carries a complex understanding of nationalism where the outcome is open. Birthday parties can bring different people together, but they can also be experienced as an enforced obligatory ritual, imposed from above. Another aspect is that birthday parties intended to offer a common ground of participation expose economic and social differences as they can make differently situated homes visible for the participants. In his introduction to *The Gift*, the sociologist Marcel Mauss (1990) points to modern societies where Christmas and birthday presents, weddings and any kind of invitation imply obligations, and the gift's recipient feels strongly compelled to reciprocate. The wish to appear on an equal footing with other families can nudge parents to make an extra effort, economically and socially, to arrange a birthday party. The quest for inclusion

and equality can also result in parents making sure that their children give birthday presents that are less expensive, much cheaper than they can afford. This way they can keep down the costs of attending birthday parties, also for other families.

During our fieldwork we talked to a poor single mother who even sold her own furniture in order to be able to host the kind of birthday party her child expected. This was not a common practice among those we interviewed, but it suggests how the wish to be in an equal, egalitarian position can include an effort and a struggle to be able to arrange birthday parties. This was the case not only for parents with a migrant background, but also for majority parents struggling socio-economically, such as the single mother. The desire to be on an equal footing can in some cases mean that parents do not celebrate birthdays for the child and do not allow their child to attend other children's birthday parties in order to avoid the feeling of shame related to poverty.

Ideas of cultural sameness, Gullestad (2002) argues, are part of the production of an "invisible fence" vis-à-vis immigrants. Immigrants are expected to play down their differences or else they risk being viewed as compromising the narrative of Norway as "a homogeneous, tolerant, anti-racist, and peace-loving society" (Gullestad 2002:59). Scandinavian societies are characterized by notions of strong similarities and cultural notions of equality (Olwig 2011), which produces specific policies and ideologies of social incorporation (Bendixsen, Bringslid and Vike 2018). The image of egalitarianism upheld, although cracking, by the Norwegian majority population has partly become dependent on whether non-

Western immigrants are considered to perform according to standards of normality.

The present construction of egalitarianism as a social norm and cultural value – that is, a one norm society – is a factor of exclusionary mechanisms as Norwegian society grows more heterogeneous (Bendixsen et al. 2018). Using sameness as a scale for measuring whether someone should be identified as equal, risks constituting certain kinds of difference as problematic and can even be interpreted as a deviation or a lack. The ways in which the cultural construction of egalitarianism as sameness has become entangled with nationalism and the racialization of difference contributes to a situation in which “immigrants’ are asked to ‘become Norwegian’, at the same time as it is tacitly assumed that this is something they can never really achieve” (Gullestad 2002:59). Simultaneously, such expectations also mean that newcomers such as migrants are seen as people who potentially can fit into Norwegian normative standards.

Different reasons, rationalizations and practicalities interacted in different ways and affected whether parents let their children take part in birthday celebrations or not. Some minority or Muslim parents in our material expressed that they cannot or do not want their children to participate in birthday celebrations due to religious concerns or economic or practical limitations. Some other minority or Muslim parents in our material did engage with and organize birthday parties for children, some expressing that they saw this as a way for them and their children to take part in Norwegian rituals.

The fear or shame of exposing their own economic or practical shortcomings can

make both majority and minority parents withdraw from birthday celebrations. In order to appear equal it might be a better option for some to hide differences that could become visible by hosting or attending birthday celebrations. From our material it becomes clear that parents who do not let their children attend or celebrate birthday parties have many different reasons to do so, intertwining practical, economic, social and religious aspects of their everyday life. As seen throughout this article, the understanding among members of the majority society for different reasons for not participating in the birthday ritual seems to range from no understanding at all to a more open-minded curiosity about why some people do not take part.

Conclusion

As we have seen, birthday parties are loaded with meaning, and bring together many intersecting conflicts and expose economic, social, cultural and religious differences in Norwegian society today. Going back to the question of whether birthdays are obligatory, raised by the mother with a Somali background, our foray into the organization of birthday parties shows that informally they are thought of as obligatory, being a naturalized and integrated ritual of childhood within majority Norwegian culture. As such, they constitute a ritual of everyday nationalism. The way that a number of parents and professionals talk about birthday parties gives the impression that migrants who embrace the tradition of birthday parties “the Norwegian way” are viewed as better included than those who celebrate birthdays differently or not at all. Discussions and practices of birthday parties can

be interpreted as statements concerning how to raise the next generation, and how to develop local and national communities. The ritual of the birthday party is politicized and given the symbolic importance of fostering national identification, committed to values of equality and inclusion.

Birthday parties are considered to be able to instigate encounters between children attending the same school. The repetitive and continuous celebration of children in the school class is intended to create and affirm inclusion and prevent exclusion. Sharing this ritual is assumed to promote trust and solidarity, also among parents. At the same time, the celebration is filtered with particular ideals of how to do it "the right way". Migrants as well as non-migrants are expected to comply with these ideals and norms that are mostly implicitly vocalized. In the fieldwork we did within the larger project of which this study is a part, we found that schools expected migrant parents to comply with dominant and largely unspoken ideals of intensive parenting in Norway (Bendixsen & Danielsen 2020). Performing birthday parties becomes part of the generalized expectations towards parenting.

Birthday parties represent a hope and a desire to create encounters across social and economic differences. Preventing or not facilitating for children to attend birthday parties was seen as unacceptable by Norwegian majority society because it also denied the child the opportunity to become a member of Norwegian society. Not accepting a birthday invitation can be interpreted as rejecting social relationships with the specific child, engagement with the school class, the neighbourhood or integra-

tion into national values such as trust, equality and social inclusion. Taking part in the ritual of a birthday party became a symbol of adapting to Norwegian ways of life. Notably, those who for various reasons did not arrange or attend parties may not be aware of these expectations and concerns as they are seldom vocalized directly. However, some migrant parents considered birthday parties for children as a ritual that was imposed on them from institutions such as kindergartens and schools.

This article has shown that there are many different reasons that interact and influence the ways parents view and react to birthday parties. Among the migrants who were reluctant to participate in the ritual, some dismiss it as against their religious conviction. Others said it was too expensive for them to afford. Others fear that they are not capable of doing the ritual in the way that is expected of them, or that it is too much work due to practical reasons if they have many children to raise. The wish to appear on an equal footing can encourage some parents to facilitate birthday parties and others to avoid such parties in order to hide existing differences. As a consequence, while some consider birthday parties as important encounters between children with a different backgrounds, in practice birthday parties sometimes expose and sharpen economic and social differences to such an extent that the ritual exposes and establishes difference and leads instead to avoidance.

As Scott (2007:104) points out, rituals have intended effects as well as unintended effects when performed in practice. When rituals have a strong standing, as birthday parties for children have in Norway, they

affect and can have consequences for those who do not participate or are excluded from taking part in the ritual. The Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage has interpreted Western ideas of white tolerance, presented through ideas of multiculturalism, as a fantasy of a national order where minorities are objects of a national will (2000:98) and a lack of capacity of acknowledging minorities' own wills. Birthday parties for children are indeed examples of such tolerance and its borders. Along with Knott (2015) we also underline here the "contingency and messiness of nationalism in everyday life" (2015:8). When nationalism is investigated through empirical fieldwork, as we have done, the complexity of the phenomenon becomes visible, showcasing the blurring of borders between us and them and how nationalism is given meaning by different actors. Some majority parents are willing to adjust the content of the ritual of birthdays celebrations in order to make the ritual more inclusionary. To take part in a birthday celebration can act as way to make contact with others you would not otherwise have a common ground to meet with. With the help of the concept of everyday nationalism, the article has highlighted contradictions in how nationalism is enacted in different ways in everyday life. Using birthday parties for children as a lens to discuss how we live together today, shows the importance of schools and neighbourhoods in making inclusive and exclusive paths in our everyday life. As Millei (2018:94) states, exposing and learning about processes of everyday nationalism can help to offer new entry points where relations can be reshaped towards a more inclusive ideal and form of everyday na-

tionalism.

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Notes

- 1 There are however, established religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses who do not allow their members to celebrate birthdays, but these are considered as deviant from the general norm.
- 2 All quotations from Norwegian sources are translated by the authors.

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Observations

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