

# 'Hey, teach these kids to eat their own food!': Institutional intergroup contact in immigrant mothers' talk

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## Abstract

Although informal segregation often persists in multiethnic neighbourhoods, local institutions offering public services may act as an important setting for intergroup contact. Therefore, we studied how immigrant mothers of young children discursively construct institutional intergroup contact with workers of public playgrounds and kindergartens. We conducted longitudinal interviews with 10 immigrant mothers three times over the period of a year in 2 multi-ethnic neighbourhoods in Helsinki, Finland. Using Critical Discursive Psychology, we analysed respondents' talk about the encounters and identified three interpretative repertoires: 'contact as asserting rights', 'contact as helping', and 'contact as cultural rectification'. Our analysis showed how mothers positioned themselves and the workers differently in terms of agency and power in each repertoire. Our findings stress the importance of studying people's own sense-making of institutional contact, with different roles for participants, and that construction of agency within institutional contact is important for building equal membership in society. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's [Community and Social Impact Statement](#).

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**KEYWORDS**

agency, Critical Discursive Psychology, hierarchical contact, institutional contact, intergroup contact, interpretative repertoire, power, subject position

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

For decades social psychological contact research has had a particular focus on positive forms of close-to-optimal intergroup contact, with a strong emphasis on attitude change which is used as the measure of successful contact (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005). Although this has shown intergroup contact to be effective (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), several authors have criticized traditional contact research for its distance from real-life contacts that are embedded in their material and socio-historical context (Dixon et al., 2005; McKeown & Dixon, 2017). Critical contact research has approached the problem by studying everyday intergroup contact in places where people actually spend time, showing that contact is often scarce, superficial, or even avoided (Alexander & Tredoux, 2010; Dixon & Durrheim, 2003; Paajanen, Seppälä, Stevenson, & Finell, 2022; Paajanen, Seppälä, Stevenson, Riikonen, & Finell, 2023).

Both traditional and critical contact research have mainly focused on non-hierarchical contact between peers or people with similar status and roles, such as beachgoers (Dixon & Durrheim, 2003), visitors to community libraries, a sports centre, and a shopping mall (Priest, Paradies, Ferdinand, Rouhani, & Kelaher, 2014), students on university campuses (Alexander & Tredoux, 2010) and in schools (McKeown, Cairns, Stringer, & Rae, 2012), or mothers of small children in multiethnic neighbourhoods (Paajanen et al., 2023). Fewer studies have explored intergroup contact in contexts where participants have asymmetric roles and power positions, such as contact between airport authorities and Muslim passengers (Blackwood, Hopkins, & Reicher, 2013), White salespeople and Black customers (Schreer, Smith, & Thomas, 2009), or Black domestic workers and their White employees (Durrheim, Jacobs, & Dixon, 2014; Murray, Durrheim, & Dixon, 2022). Studies on institutional hierarchical contact in public services are especially rare (but see Weiss, 2021). Such institutional encounters are a form of intergroup contact where members of different groups (e.g., immigrants and majority group members) meet and interact briefly only once or repetitively, and which, as is typical for real-life contact, does not meet all the requirements of optimal contact (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Institutional intergroup contact involving the public services differs in many ways from intergroup contact in locations such as university campuses, beaches, or shops. In addition to varying roles and power positions, public-service users are often in need of help, while service providers' orientations are professionally structured and governed by state and municipal policy. Thus, hierarchical institutional intergroup encounters may be qualitatively different to other types of intergroup contact, yet research in the field (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) has typically overlooked this every day, repetitive, and unavoidable contact that may have a profound effect on shaping intergroup relations. Such contact differs from much studied non-hierarchical intergroup contact between peers in schools and universities especially by its asymmetrical nature and the double role of the service providers as both majority group members and as representatives of the officials. In this study we focus on hierarchical institutional intergroup contact between immigrant mothers of young children and municipal employees in public playgrounds and kindergartens. Approaching it using Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP; Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998), we aim to expand the scope of social psychological contact research to cover a wider range of everyday institutional contacts.

### 1.1 | Immigrant parents and agency in service encounters

Public service encounters as intergroup contact can have a repetitive character and are almost unavoidable in the everyday life of immigrant families in Nordic welfare states (Kangas & Kvist, 2019). Nursing, social work, and other social sciences research has showed that minorities often experience distinct barriers and hardship when using

child-related public services that do not support their agency as active citizens (e.g., Kabatanya & Vagli, 2021; Nordberg, 2015). In Norway, for example, where the welfare society structure is similar to Finland's (Kangas & Kvist, 2019), studies have been made of intergroup service encounters between immigrant mothers and public health nurses in diverse neighbourhoods (Erstad, 2018) and between teachers and immigrant parents in school-home cooperation (Bendixsen & Danielsen, 2020). These have found that, in institutional settings, parenting norms are constructed and imposed from a middle-class, majority group perspective, often ignoring immigrant parents' social realities. In a similar vein, Handulle and Vassenden (2021) have highlighted how carefully parents with Somali backgrounds of kindergarten-age children try to perform 'Norwegian' parenting, thereby avoiding negative stereotyping linked to their ethnic-racial backgrounds and the risk of being unjustly examined by Child Welfare Services.

These studies sharply portray how ethnic minority parents often feel pressured to submit to the style of parenting advocated by the institutions and, in particular, that parents often experience a lack of recognition and agency in such encounters. This powerless feeling of lacking choice and agency may harm their experience of coequal citizenship (see Stevenson, Dixon, Hopkins, & Luyt, 2015) and complicate integration into the receiving society. Therefore, while service encounters may help to circumvent the typical transience of everyday intergroup contacts, their hierarchical nature poses other challenges. For this reason, it is important to study how immigrant mothers construct such contacts and the agency and power relations they contain.

## 1.2 | A critical discursive approach to agency, intergroup contact, and service relations

In this article, we approach institutional intergroup contact using CDP (Edley, 2001; Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007; Wetherell, 1998), examining how contact, the situated identities within the contact situation, and related power relations and agency are discursively constructed in minority group members' talk. We consider talk a social activity in which the speakers accomplish social actions and construct situated, fleeting identities (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). Different discursive constructions of contact may sustain, construct, or deconstruct the distribution of power and agency in these relations (see Reynolds et al., 2007; Wetherell & Edley, 2014).

Although the discursive construction of 'the other' or 'the immigrant' has often been studied in social psychological discursive studies (e.g., Nortio, Varjonen, Mähönen, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2016; Verkuyten, 2005), discursive research on intergroup *contact* is rarer. Discursive research into everyday multiculturalism, however, can offer some insights that relate to contact as well. Verkuyten (2004) studied discursively the meanings and interpretations of multiculturalism of 'ordinary' Dutch people and concluded that studying such grass-root talk can afford valuable material to reflect upon the theoretical claims on diversity in everyday life. Translating this practice to consider contact, the minority group members' talk on hierarchical contact can offer tools to inspect and revise the current thinking about intergroup contact and power asymmetry, especially as previous contact research has leaned heavily on studies of majority groups. So, for example Nortio, Renvik, and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2020) studied discursively the majority Finn's attitudes towards multiculturalism and noted that asymmetrical power relations between groups may be used to justify and argument critical multiculturalism discourse which helps maintain the unequal status quo. In our study we focus on minority group's talk of hierarchically organized contact which offers a view on how such asymmetries may be contested or accepted.

In the area of intergroup contact, and using CDP, Riikonen, Finell, Suoninen, Paajanen, and Stevenson (2023) analysed how local and immigrant mothers discursively constructed contact participants' agency and responsibility in intergroup encounters at meetings for mothers and children in Finland. Their findings on the rhetorical attribution of agency in intergroup contact situations was in line with Kerr et al.'s (2017) study based on accounts of intergroup conflict in a South African farming community. Both studies highlighted that sense-making of contact situations does not happen in isolation but in a social context that includes power relations and social roles, and that constructing or downplaying agency in talk may position contact participants in varied ways. Elsewhere, qualitative studies focusing on the relationship between Black domestic workers and their White employers in South Africa illustrated the fine-tuned,

everyday practices that maintain social hierarchy and a power imbalance (Durrheim et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2022; Murray & Durrheim, 2019); within this context, the wider status hierarchy was reproduced through ostensibly positive relations which reinforced acceptance of the status quo.

Furthermore, a CDP study of single women's talk about their singleness that analysed the dilemmas and contradictions around choice and agency (Reynolds et al., 2007) offers an observant example of how agency is discursively constructed in a different context, pointing out its situational construction. The authors note that a single account can employ different positions with differing levels of agency and control, meaning that the narrator's sense of agency may vary. With this frame in mind, we aim to identify the ways in which immigrant mothers discursively construct intergroup contact, their situational identities and agency, and the power relations inherent to contact in the institutional settings of early childhood education and care (ECEC).

### 1.3 | ECEC institutions in Finland

Our study focuses on immigrant mothers' talk about encounters with the personnel of ECEC institutions in Helsinki, Finland. We consider both kindergarten and playground services public, because the use of private kindergartens is also financially supported in Finland (see Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2021). In 2020, 37% of 1-year-old children attended daycare and 84% of 3-year-olds (Säkkinen & Kuoppala, 2021). Alongside the kindergartens, ECEC is also offered in public playgrounds in Helsinki neighbourhoods (66 playgrounds with staff; City of Helsinki, 2023). The playground activities are especially popular among parents who are taking care of young children at home with the support of parental allowance, which is mostly used by women (Eerola, Lammi-Taskula, O'Brien, Hietamäki, & Rääkkönen, 2019; Säkkinen & Kuoppala, 2021). The two studied contexts offer an ideal setting in which to analyse the meanings constructed around institutional intergroup contacts, as most of the workers are majority group members and practically all parents use one or both of these services during their children's early years. This means that intergroup encounters for mothers with immigrant backgrounds are almost unavoidable in the context.

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Data

The data consist of 3 longitudinal interviews conducted during a year with 10 immigrant-background mothers aged between 23 and 38, who took care of at least one child younger than 3 years of age (1–4 children; the youngest aged between 4 and 27 months) at home at the time of the first interview, and who were recruited in two multiethnic neighbourhoods in Helsinki. The respondents had different ethnic backgrounds (Asian, African, European, and American) and had lived in Finland between 16 months and 18 years at the time of the first interview. In total, 29 interviews were conducted in Finnish, English, and Spanish by the first author (one respondent did not participate in the second interview) that varied in length from 39 to 174 min, averaging out at 103 min. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim (for transcription notations, see Appendix). The study is part of MAMANET, a larger research project and has received a prior ethical statement from the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region, Finland.

The aim of the research project was to investigate intragroup and intergroup contact between mothers living in the neighbourhoods of Helsinki. Being a mother often leads to changes in social relationships of a woman and increases the need for peer support and, therefore, this stage of life could also afford opportunities for intergroup contact among mothers in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. When conducting an ethnography as a part of this project, however, we observed that intergroup contact among mothers was rare or described as improbable, and that in the absence of these peer contacts less optimal types of everyday contact became meaningful to many mothers with

immigrant background (Paajanen et al., 2022, 2023; Riikonen et al., 2023). In the interviews, which we started at the same with ethnography, we aimed to investigate the everyday life and contacts by asking the respondents about their social relations (e.g., 'Describe the friendships and relationships you have currently/you have had since the last interview'), everyday life in the neighbourhood (e.g., 'How the ways and places of spending time have changed when your baby has grown?'), motherhood (e.g., 'Where and how do you spend time with your child(ren) in the neighborhood?'), and diversity (e.g., 'Have you got to know mothers from other cultures?'), but not specifically about their encounters with kindergarten and playground workers. Nine out of 10 respondents, however, raised the topic themselves, which drew our attention to it. These accounts formed the data set for this study.

## 2.2 | Analytic procedure

We analysed the data using CDP, in which interpretative repertoires and subject positions are the key tools of analysis (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). *Interpretative repertoires* are understood as socially shared and coherent ways to talk about the world and its events, recognizable through their themes, common places, and tropes (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). Within the interpretative repertoires, the speakers construct *subject positions* for themselves and position others (Davies & Harré, 1990; Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998): temporal identities that are actively created in and through talk (Davies & Harré, 1990). The subject position is an important tool in CDP that connects the broader view of 'interpretative repertoires to the social construction of particular selves' (Edley, 2001, p. 210).

We began our analysis by systematically selecting all those accounts from the interview transcripts in which the respondents talked about intergroup contact between immigrant mothers and majority group workers in kindergartens and public playgrounds. These included descriptions of both direct and indirect contact, and either the mothers' own, or a friends' child was present at some level in every account. When carefully re-reading them, we focused on the language the respondents used in constructing the contact and relations between the participants, as we wanted to identify common and shared ways of making sense of institutional intergroup contact: the interpretative repertoires, in other words (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). We paid special attention to how the respondents positioned themselves and the workers within the repertoires, and how they constructed their personal choice and agency in the situation (Reynolds et al., 2007). The authors discussed and developed these interpretative repertoires and related subject positions throughout the analytic process. After identifying them, we chose the extracts that best exemplified each repertoire and its related subject positions for detailed analysis. Finally, and following the critical approach, we reflected on the distribution of power which was closely related to agency (Reynolds et al., 2007; Wetherell & Edley, 2014).

Some of the extracts were originally in English, others were translated from Spanish and Finnish by the first author. We use pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the respondents and the data are not publicly available.

## 3 | ANALYSIS

We identified three interpretative repertoires in the mothers' talk on service encounters: 'contact as asserting rights', 'contact as helping', and 'contact as cultural rectification'.

### 3.1 | Repertoire 1: 'Contact as asserting rights'

In the *contact as asserting rights* repertoire, respondents defined the encounter as an exchange between an informed citizen—a mother claiming care for her child—and a service provider, whose societal duty it is to offer the service. Mothers use this repertoire to justify their claims for better care for their children and more functional

communication with the workers by positioning themselves as active citizens with reasonable demands and workers as unreliable service providers. Respondents used this repertoire only in the context of kindergarten, where the children are left alone without their parents and the workers consequently have a high level of responsibility for them.

The following contact description shows how the positions of active citizen and liable service provider are constructed. Here, Marisol talks about a meeting with kindergarten workers and describes why she demanded an interpreter for future meetings:

Extract 1: Kindergarten (Marisol)

I told Matti [spouse], I saw their faces and they were wondering why she wants an interpreter [laughs]. But it's also my right. I told him, I also have to, like, make my complaint because we are not, I am not the only foreigner in that group. And [this] is a service that we have to demand, or we have the right to request. Also, maybe there are other parents who don't ask. They just come and pick up the children and leave, and they are also concerned about what is happening or would like to know more.

In her talk, Marisol constructs the encounter as societal exchange with rights and duties by explaining that the workers questioned her 'right' to an interpreter. After explaining that the workers non-verbally questioned this right ('I saw their faces and they were wondering why'), she moves on to justify her claim for her right to a better service. Marisol frames her request as active citizenship ('we have to demand') and as an act of solidarity with other foreign parents: 'maybe there are other parents who don't ask' for an interpreter even if they 'would like to know more'. Here, to justify her claims, Marisol's words mobilize both officially defined rights and a greater good, that of solidarity among foreign parents with whom she aligns herself. The variability of values she invokes is common in interview talk: here, she draws on both liberal individualism and active citizenship/communitarianism (see Condor & Gibson, 2007), thereby positioning herself as an informed citizen with reasonable demands but also as a person with rights. Marisol's alignment with other foreign parents presents the workers as Finns, and positions them as disputers questioning her rightful demand.

In other examples the agentic position of the informed citizen was more ambivalent. In the following extract Alice tells why she is 'not really' happy with the kindergarten her youngest child attends.

Extract 2: Kindergarten (Alice)

A: Sometimes some [of my] colleagues will tell me that she was there crying and crying and crying and crying and no one was attending to her.

Q: Have you tried to talk about it with the personnel?

A: Yes I, asked them, and they were like, 'it's not always', and sometimes they try all options and she's not stopping. But I think that it's because maybe they have a lot of kids to attend to. And the issue I have with them is, they have a strict time [table] that they have to follow. It's not that flexible. [...]

Q: How do you feel about it? You have tried to talk about it and you see that they're..

A: (I have not had to) complain again, so maybe I'm thinking things are maybe better.

The extract begins with Alice's powerful description of her child 'crying and crying and crying and crying' in the kindergarten with no one attending to her, observed by an outsider. She displays some mistrust towards the workers as she does not believe their explanation for it ('But I think...'). While first constructing herself in an agentic position of asking 'them' about this, she immediately moves on to describe the practical constraints of the kindergarten ('lot of kids [...] strict time [table]'); then, grounding herself in a more passive position, at the end of the extract she mentions not having to 'complain again' as 'things are maybe better'. After a more agentic beginning, she portrays the situation as something that she ultimately has very little power to change.

While the repertoire of *contact as asserting rights* draws from neoliberal ideals of freedom of choice and the right to demand proper service, often the service-demanding character of this talk turns into helpless capitulation and acceptance of 'bad service'. The following extract illustrates this even further. Here Fu describes her contact with a kindergarten nurse concerning an accident involving her son:

Extract 3: Kindergarten (Fu)

[H]e [Fu's spouse] had a phone call; the nurse told him on the phone that the boy there, was swinging, swinging, and swinging on the chair. Then he [...] fell from the chair to the floor and the nurse said [he had] a centimeter-long wound .. When I heard what the nurse said, and the boy was swinging and swinging there, I knew that my son is there like he is at home; even when eating he's moving there, on the chair. But this thing has happened. I can't anyways do anything or one can't .. getting angry doesn't help at all. [...] But on the other hand, I think that he's less than four years old, a boy, in a kindergarten. They're there as an adult, and it's [their] duty to keep an eye on what's going on there.

Fu constructs the event as a failed service relationship in which the worker has been unsuccessful in providing the reasonably expected level of care—keeping her child safe—instead blaming the child for the accident. By referring twice to the worker's repeated words ('swinging and swinging'), Fu presents the worker as shirking responsibility and justifying it by blaming Fu's son for the accident. Fu notes that she is aware that her child moves in the chair, building credibility to herself as a mother, 'but' that, 'on the other hand', the boy cannot be blamed as he is young and in a kindergarten. Furthermore, she contrasts this with the 'adults' whose 'duty' it is to take care of the children there, thus constructing the workers as responsible. While Fu is positioning herself as an informed citizen with reasonable claims, she narrates the story as an avalanche of events which she has no power to influence. Finally, her talk displays helplessness and reluctant acceptance of a failed service contact when saying, 'this thing has happened. I can't anyways do anything [...] getting angry doesn't help at all'. Thus, Fu's account portrays recognition of the power imbalance in the contact between herself as a parent and the workers as service providers; while she assigns blame to the workers, she presents what happens in the kindergarten as out of her reach.

### 3.2 | Repertoire 2: 'Contact as helping'

In the second interpretative repertoire, *contact as helping*, the respondents portrayed the contact as one of receiving help, to which they were expected to respond in order to continue the relationship in a positive tone; this repertoire was used to describe contacts with some level of intimacy and caring. Mothers positioned themselves as persons who lacked knowledge or resources, and the workers, who had the required knowledge, as competent and kind enough to share it. In this repertoire, used in the contexts of kindergarten and playground, mothers portrayed themselves as passive recipients of teaching and guidance which enabled the apparently positive development of the relationship.

The following extract by Svetlana clearly illustrates how the positions of an immigrant mother in need of help and a resourceful Finnish worker were discursively constructed:

Extract 4: Playground (Svetlana)

A: I had a lot of times when I did not (.) understood what should be done with the children, and what clothes are right. Usually I go to the playground, but the clothing wasn't right because there was coming water or something. And the instructors talked to me, that these gloves are not all right. I said, 'Thank you, thank you, oh what is alright [then]?' [They] spoke to me.

Q: You were happy when they told you that ..

A: Yeah, yeah. And I always say, 'thank you,' and 'tell me what's better and what's right'. And sometimes I look, just look, sometimes I ask, instructor, well not parents, but Minttu, for example, or Jatta or Sirpa [instructors], everything [you] can, may ask.

Here, Svetlana constructs the contact as friendly but firm assistance. She portrays herself as an uninformed, foreign mother in the Finnish environment ('I did not (.) understand what should be done'), emphasizing how she was confused 'a lot of times' about how to dress her children for the playground. At the same time, she portrays the playground staff as capable and knowing by recounting how they 'always' tell her 'what's better and what's right'. By repeating they 'talked to me', '[they] spoke to me', Svetlana emphasizes the importance of this interaction and further constructs a close and positive relationship with the workers by calling them by their first names. Svetlana's own positioning as humble and in need of support in relation to the more dominant position of the workers is further highlighted by her demonstration of gratitude throughout the extract ('thank you, thank you').

Although helping and making contact with service users is part of the role of the workers, mothers constructed the contact in this repertoire as intimate interaction and benevolent helping, also visible in the following extract where Rose describes her encounters with a kindergarten worker with whom she does not have a common language:

Extract 5: Kindergarten (Rose)

A: [...] my daughter's caregiver, for example, doesn't speak English, and we communicate, [laughs] and we are friends somehow. We just find a way of communicating. And we still meet outside of the day care area I'm like 'Oh, hello', just, we talk and she doesn't understand what I'm saying, I don't understand what she's saying but we are still talking and smiling, and we just somehow find a way around communicating. [...] Her name is Siru. I call her Sivu most of the time because I'm used to 'sivu'; 'sivu' is page [in Finnish], so I see it on the pages of books all the time, so I would just say Sivu then she's, 'Siru, moi [hi]' [laughs] then we, just..

Q: But she recognized that you are speaking about her.

A: Yeah she's [laughs] corrected me a lot of times. I should not forget again. But sometimes I make that error.

Rose constructs repeated brief contact with the same kindergarten worker as friendly help. As in Svetlana's example, the contact is described as repetitive and includes kindly correcting, to which Rose expresses her acceptance with laughter: 'she's [laughs] corrected me a lot of times'. Rose recounts that their encounters are marked by 'talking and smiling' and she laughs when talking about this during the interview. The repetition of how they 'find a way of communicating' emphasizes the common effort in the endeavour. Therefore, while some power difference is evident between the mother in need of linguistic assistance and the worker with the required knowledge, contact is constructed as egalitarian and personal ('we are friends somehow'). Using the expression 'my daughter's caregiver' constructs intimacy in the relationship. Rose does not express explicit and humble gratitude for the help like Svetlana but, rather, highlights the benevolence and friendliness of the contact by displaying acceptance of the kindly corrective remarks by the worker.

### 3.3 | Repertoire 3: 'Contact as cultural rectification'

In the final repertoire, *contact as cultural rectification*, respondents framed the contact as a conflict situation between two different cultures. The mothers used this repertoire when describing contact situations where workers intrusively corrected their behaviour, or that of their children or, indirectly, their peers, to bring it into line with the ethnic

majority's cultural expectations. Mothers discursively positioned themselves as between the ingroup and outgroup cultures and the worker as a cultural authority. This authority position subsumes the knowledge of 'decent behaviour' in Finland and the power to impose its rules, which leaves little space for mothers to construct agency for themselves within the contact situation. In the kindergarten, the workers were presented as less approachable than in the playgrounds, but in both contexts they were positioned as cultural authorities. Within this repertoire the contact is constructed as a 'cultural collision' in which the Finnish culture and its representatives, Finnish workers, dominate.

The following extract illustrates how contact is constructed as cultural rectification in the context of the kindergarten:

Extract 6: Kindergarten (Hawo)

Yeah, [it's] just our idea that [...] we say, '[s]he's still small and may at some point understand and stop'. Yes, this affects us [so] that sometimes children take someone else's food, we don't tell [them] properly. And when they start kindergarten, immediately the nurses will notice that our children take a spoon and try to take [from] the other children's plates, they take food from there. That's why the nurses immediately command and say, 'Hey, teach these kids to eat their own food and give [them their] own plate.' Of course, you understand yourself what the child had done, and the children thought that [it was] just right. Really, we don't stop that, yeah. That's why I'm trying now to teach my own kids.

In this extract, Hawo displays the contact with kindergarten nurses as an encounter where different educational cultures clash, with the workers rectifying the 'cultural errors' of the immigrants. Hawo aligns herself with her ethnic ingroup and its culture as she highlights the differences, emphasizing several times her ingroup's ways ('our idea'; 'we say'). She continues constructing the group boundaries by describing the children's behaviour in the kindergarten ('our children take a spoon'), from which follows authoritative 'commanding' by the workers. Hawo portrays the workers' instructions to her and her ingroup mothers as concrete and direct ('teach these kids to eat their own food and give [them their] own plate'), which emphasizes the workers' position as cultural authorities imposing the rules of 'decent' parenting. Hawo presents the situation as containing little space for agency on the part of the rectified immigrant mothers, and thus takes a pragmatic stand herself: although she claims in the interview to have greater knowledge about the whole situation ('Of course you understand yourself'), she says that in educating her children she now follows the prescribed rules ('I'm trying now to teach my own kids'). Thus, Hawo positions herself between two considerations: her cultural knowledge is broader but, nevertheless, the worker has the power to criticize and command. Therefore, the mother is constructed as occupying a passive position in relation to the workers' authoritative agency.

In respondents' talk about playgrounds, however, agency in terms of contact was presented as more malleable. In her interview, Hawo talked about two playgrounds in her neighbourhood, describing one as 'multicultural' and the other as 'less multicultural'. She explained that she prefers the 'multicultural' playground where the workers—colloquially, 'the aunties'—had become 'accustomed during a long time' to setting the cultural rules straight, such as how to queue for a free lunch. Hawo then describes how her ingroup members jumped the queue in the 'less multicultural' playground, saying that the workers did not stop this and explaining it by their lack of 'experience'. This narration led Hawo to contrast it with such contact in the 'multicultural' playground.

Extract 7: Playground (Hawo)

But there at least the workers just right away say directly so that first they intervene. But a lot of [Finnish] people leave angry right away [...] And then they just hate the workers too [but] the workers are just trying .. they are trying always to explain a little, because this thing, the [Finnish] people don't understand that they [Hawo's ingroup] mean nothing bad. I understand that bypassing the queue is really bad for Finns [a laugh]. But for our people when many are used to it for a long time, it's really hard to explain [to them] how it irritates the others.

As in the previous extract, Hawo positions the workers as the cultural authorities in the playground. But while in the prior extract we showed that the strict commands by the kindergarten workers were not represented as expected or wished for, in the playground Hawo constructs *expectations* that intergroup contact between workers and immigrant mothers will involve cultural rectification and the workers will 'right away say directly' and 'intervene'. Hawo portrays the workers' intentions to 'explain a little' as an important aspect of interaction that supports social harmony between 'Finns' and 'our people'. As with the previous extract, she positions herself between the groups; she has cultural knowledge of both the local Finnish culture ('bypassing the queue is really bad for Finns') and that of her ethnic ingroup ('our people [...] are used to it for a long time'). The difference in agency between her ingroup's mothers and the playground workers is evident in expectations of workers' coercive interventions; the workers are assigned the agency to intervene and set the rules, while mothers may observe but their possibilities to act depend on the workers.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

In this article we have analysed how immigrant mothers position both themselves and public ECEC service workers, how power relations and agency were constructed, and the three interpretative repertoires that were used when talking about institutional intergroup contact. The first of these, *contact as asserting rights*, presented contact as an encounter wherein immigrant mothers asserted their rightful demands (often without success), positioning themselves as active citizens and the workers as unreliable service providers. The second, *contact as helping*, portrayed the encounters as based on workers' sharing knowledge, emphasized the workers' supportive behaviour, and served to construct a passive and subordinate position for the mothers. The third, *contact as cultural rectification*, emphasized conflict and opposition in the encounters, constructing the mothers as knowledgeable of both ingroup and outgroup cultures but with little agency, as the workers had the power to impose the rules of the majority culture upon them.

Our results contribute to existing research in several ways. First, while contact research assumes that positive contact typically improves group relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), critical contact researchers problematize this by noting that apparently positive, harmonious contact may reproduce intergroup inequality (e.g., McKeown & Dixon, 2017; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008). The *contact as helping* repertoire shows how mothers situate themselves in a passive position vis-à-vis workers by displaying abundant gratitude for their help. Prior research of hierarchical contact (Durrheim et al., 2014; Murray & Durrheim, 2019) suggests that such submission is required to ensure the needed help from the advantaged group's members, but we suggest that in terms of public service institutions the help is structurally ensured and need not reproduce intergroup inequality. Indeed, the power positions are not fixed and, by using different repertoires, the mothers can also claim power for themselves. In the *contact as asserting rights* repertoire, mothers constructed their own agency by showing resistance and in the *contact as cultural rectification* repertoire the mothers suggested some power over the worker by recounting their broader cultural knowledge, but were still obliged to adopt a passive role. Thus, our study provides novel insights into how minority group members construct and contest power in hierarchical public service relationships, but it also shows how changing the power imbalance is presented highly improbable by the mothers due to their overlapping disadvantaged positions of both a minority group member and a service user. Our study also gives further evidence that institutional contact needs to be understood within the specific context of power and hierarchy (Durrheim et al., 2014).

Second, while indeed the institutional encounters between mothers and ECEC workers were described as meaningful intergroup contact by the immigrant mothers, they did not afford a solution for the immigrant mothers' lack of (positive) intergroup contact. Regardless of the contacts' repetitive and professionally structured character, oftentimes they were not presented as positive let alone equal. The power imbalance inherent in institutional contact seems easily to frustrate the intergroup contact opportunity, as the professionals apply a dual approach of care and control in their dealings with service users (Bendixsen & Danielsen, 2020; Erstad, 2018), meanwhile representing the

majority ethnic group. In peer contact (e.g., between mothers; see Riikonen et al., 2023), a shared identity may be employed to facilitate contact, but this seems unlikely in institutional contact because of power and role differences. Prior social psychological contact research studying group hierarchy and intergroup power relations has showed that a typical mismatch between advantaged and disadvantaged groups is their differing interest to discuss power disparities; the advantaged groups tend to have less interest to discuss group-based power and are more willing to find commonalities among groups to maintain the status quo (Saguy et al., 2008). However, this research has not investigated role-related power. In contrast to previous studies, our study suggests that power related to different roles and its implications for the agency of the less powerful group is another layer in the hierarchies present in intergroup contact, which needs to be studied further. Our analysis shows that group- and role-based power is often blurred together in talk, which implies the disadvantaged groups' difficulty in identifying when their lack of power and agency is because of being a service user and when it is due to their minority group identity. This ambiguity may undermine their ability to act against the intergroup power inequality.

Third, reflecting service use by minorities, our study has illuminated how structural power imbalances between groups are reproduced and maintained during institutional contact, and the consequences this might have for immigrant mothers' sense of citizenship. As described, the mothers constructed their agency in relation to the workers on the basis of different repertoires. To feel like an active and recognized citizen, a sense of autonomy and agency is required (see Stevenson et al., 2015). Forceful commands (or expectations of them) may risk the minority group's trust in public institutions (Handulle & Vassenden, 2021; Kabatanya & Vagli, 2021) or impose a barrier to their use (see Stevenson, McNamara, & Muldoon, 2014), thus compromising the equality of public service and citizenship. This stresses the importance of an egalitarian approach in real-life institutional intergroup contacts; apart from group relations, unsuccessful contact may have a negative impact on trust in institutions.

Thus, the practical implication of this study is that when designing ECEC services and educating their staff, minority groups' sense of agency should be supported, as it demonstrates their equal position as Finnish citizens with rights and responsibilities, thereby improving their integration. As these workers are often perceived by service users to reflect official attitudes, such an egalitarian, rights-focused approach should signal recognition and acceptance of minorities within broader society (see Stevenson et al., 2014). Of course, this relationship must be handled with care to promote positive cooperation in a child's education, but can also serve to create mutual trust and confidence, whereby minority groups do not feel threatened (see Handulle & Vassenden, 2021; Kabatanya & Vagli, 2021).

Naturally, our study also has some potential limitations. While using interviews as data has been criticized by some discursive psychologists (Potter & Hepburn, 2005), the interview situation can be adjusted to accommodate respondents' communicative skills and thus better facilitate research on linguistically disadvantaged populations (Jingree & Finlay, 2013). However, our research is only the first step in exploring the potential of institutional intergroup contact within public services for developing positive relations; future research could address the wider impacts of more egalitarian forms of institutional contact on the pro-diversity norms of both ethnic majority and minorities. Specifically, due to their authority, the institutional workers may also be in a position to positively influence peer contacts among mothers from different backgrounds.

Our results show that institutional encounters offer the possibility of repetitive intergroup contact for immigrant mothers. Yet power positions often become visible through care practices, which should be negotiated with caution and intercultural sensitivity to support the immigrant mothers' agency and coequal citizenship.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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**APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION NOTATIONS**

- (.) Short untimed pause
- .. Interrupted or continued statement
- (–) Omitted word or part of word
- (--) Omitted part of speech
- (word) Unclear word or uncertain spelling
- [...] Material deliberately omitted
- [brackets] Insertions made by researchers

Punctuation is given to make reading easy and does not indicate speech patterns.