

# 11 ‘The Obvious Dangers of this Relationship’

## Interracialized Relationships between Underage Swiss Women and Italian Men and the Implementation of the Swiss Child Protection Laws (1960–1980)

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### Introduction

Nations reproduce themselves culturally and biologically through the family (Moret, Andrikopoulos and Dahinden 2021). Joe Turner argues that ‘the family is the site for the continuity of labour, the nation and imperial civilization’ (2020, 11). Regulating society thus often means regulating the family (Bonjour and Block 2016). This gives rise to the state’s interest in controlling and managing how children grow up to become the ‘adults of tomorrow’ (Roux 2014). A specific measure of state intervention in families is the placement of children and adolescents in foster families or homes. As historical studies demonstrate, during the 20th century, these measures mostly concerned socially marginalized families, and gender-specific arguments played a crucial role in the assessments of both parents and their children (Hauss 2008; Vehkalahti 2017). More specifically, throughout Western Europe, young women were placed in educational facilities and homes due to their perceived deviant sexuality (Ericsson and Jon 2006; Germann 2014; Garðarsdóttir 2020). In Switzerland during the 1960s and 1970s, this assessment of female sexuality started to become intertwined with xenophobic discourses, as young women were increasingly in the focus of the authorities for having engaged in a relationship or sexual activities with non-Swiss men (Germann 2018). However, little is known regarding how these decisions came about. In this chapter, I aim to untangle the bureaucratic decision-making process that led to these decisions as well as the roles that intersectional categorizations of nation, race, and gender played in them.

Switzerland – like many other European countries – saw an upsurge of nationalist and xenophobic discourses in the 1960s and 1970s (Skenderovic and D’Amato 2008). This period was marked by political debates charged with the right-wing buzzword of *Überfremdung* (overforeignization). While these discourses date back to the 1920s (Kury 2003), they regained momentum in the 1960s (Skenderovic and D’Amato 2008). In the context of rising numbers of foreign workers, both trade unions and right-wing populist movements constructed

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a cultural, economic, and political threat to Switzerland and ‘Swiss culture’ (Jain 2018, 92). The political debates were accompanied by racializing ascriptions against ‘others’ and ‘foreigners’, on the basis of which their proponents saw the ‘uniqueness of the Swiss’ to be under threat (Maiolino 2012). This is especially striking since Switzerland – due to its federal structure, four language regions, and two dominant religious groups – has often been considered inherently heterogeneous (Wimmer 2011).

During this time, the preferred figures against which to construe this social imaginary were ‘the Italians’ (Falk 2022). In the 1960s and 1970s, Italian citizens constituted the largest group of foreigners living in Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> Through racist references to ‘ancestry and external characteristics such as skin and hair colour’ (Espahangizi 2020, 3), they were depicted as inherently different – as *Ausländer* (foreigners) (Maiolino 2012). Crucially, these discourses also made use of patriarchal, gendered, and racialized narratives, arguing that Swiss women needed to be ‘protected’ from Italian immigrants (Fischer and Dahinden 2017). However, according to marriage statistics from 1970, for instance, only 3% of all marriages were between Italian men and Swiss women (Ritzmann-Blickenstorfer 1996).

In this chapter, I aim to explore whether and how these narratives and discourses reverberated in state measures concerning families and particularly young women. At the heart of this chapter lies a close reading of a decision-making process that eventually led to the placement of a young Swiss woman in an educational home after she had engaged in an intimate relationship with ‘an Italian’. I analyse this placement process, drawing on intersectional feminist perspectives on the relationship between the nation, gender, and race (Yuval-Davis 1997; Collins 1998), which I combine with insights derived from studies on the anthropology of the state (Trouillot 2001). Including these perspectives in the analysis highlights how the control of supposedly ‘mixed’ relationships is anchored in the intersectional categorization of the ‘unintelligent Swiss woman’, the ‘incapable parents’, and the ‘dangerous Italian male’ as well as the bureaucratic logics and processes from which these categories emerged and became manifest in.

In doing so, the chapter adds to the discussion of the regulation of interracialized relationships on two levels: First, while scholarship on ‘mixed relationships’ or ‘mixture’ has mostly focused on marriage or prostitution (De Hart 2019b), this chapter sheds light on the regulation of these relationships through family and child protection policies. Second, this chapter demonstrates how the intersectional construction of a ‘dangerous’ relationship emerges from and within the concrete practices of implementing a specific legal framework – in this case, the Swiss ‘child protection measures’.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: After a discussion of my theoretical and analytical framework, I provide some more contextual information on child placements in Switzerland. Then, I present the methods and data that I worked with, before undertaking an in-depth discussion of my case study. In conclusion, I offer avenues for future research.

## **Intersectionality and the Control of Female Sexuality**

As Nira Yuval-Davis demonstrates in her seminal book on gender and nation, women are widely considered the 'reproducers of the nation' (1997, 4). By producing 'the population for the national "family" or nation-state' (Collins 1998, 75), the bodies and sexuality of women come into focus – opening up avenues for policing the relationships that women (and girls) engage in. This has led to a wide variety of measures for addressing the sexuality of women, which have been accentuated even further by racial and class hierarchies (De Hart 2006; Mottier 2008).

The contributions of this volume illustrate that state regulations of 'interracialized intimacies' (Haritaworn 2012) are prevalent across various geographical and historical contexts. They take the form of explicit legal regulations of marriages (De Hart 2006; Moret, Andrikopoulos, and Dahinden 2021); however, they also become apparent in more indirect regulations, such as housing and immigration policies (Mustafa 2023). The regulation of both interracialized and binational relationships also becomes visible in state measures towards families and their children (Vehkalahti 2017; Garðarsdóttir 2020). The gendered aspect of this is striking: State interventions in families that occur due to the perceived deviant sexual relationships of their children with racialized 'others' and foreigners mainly concerned daughters (Vehkalahti 2017; Germann 2018; Garðarsdóttir 2020). As Bland demonstrates 'anxiety about "mixed" relationships' were often 'asymmetrical along lines of race and gender' (2005, 31).

Thus, the problematization of supposedly 'mixed' relationships lies in both gender-specific attributions towards the partners as well as in their racialization (i.e., the assumption that they belong to inherently different groups and entities; De Hart 2019a). Like the construction of race itself, interracialized intimacies depend on social construction processes that change over time and space (De Hart 2019a; Mustafa 2023; see also Jones 2025). Regarding these processes in Western Europe in particular, nationality often serves as a 'placeholder' (Lutz 2018, 141) for race (see also Jain 2018; Zambelli 2023). While also considered an administrative category, depending on the social context, nationality is used and referred to as a racial category (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993). The racialization of Italians, as already described in the introduction, is emblematic of this (Maiolino 2012; Lavanchy 2015; Zambelli 2023). In Switzerland, this interplay between race and nation also becomes visible in the ethno-nationalist discourses that underlie the Swiss assimilationist citizenship regime (Wicker 2004), and also in the fact that nationality is still transmitted through the principle of descent (Kury 2003; Argast 2009).

An intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1998) is necessary for grasping the complex processes through which intimate relationships are assessed and categorized and also for analyzing how they are problematized, calling for state action. Intersectionality reminds us that there is no such thing as a 'genuine core' (Walgenbach 2007, 61) to categories such as gender, race, and class. Rather, they are always intertwined with other categories (dos Santos Pinto et al. 2022). In this sense, categories of difference, such as race, gender, and nationality,

are often co-constructed with other dimensions of difference (Khazaei 2018). As Crawley and Skleparis argue, we should thus investigate ‘the process by which [the categories] are constructed and the political purpose(s) that they serve’ (2018, 60). I propose doing so by examining the decision-making processes that lead to state intervention in families. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the perspective of the anthropology of the state is particularly insightful for this endeavour.

### **Intersecting Categories in Street-Level Bureaucrats’ Discretionary Practices**

Findings derived from the anthropology of the state suggest that in order to understand the reality of the state one must examine the practices of those who are responsible for the tasks and representation of the state (Trouillot 2001; Brodtkin 2012). Drawing on the work of Michael Lipsky (2010, xi), they are often referred to as ‘street-level bureaucrats’, namely

the schools, police and welfare departments, lower courts, legal service offices, and other agencies whose workers interact with and have wide discretion over the dispensation of benefits or the allocation of public sanctions.  
(Lipsky 2010, p. xi)

Street-level bureaucrats make decisions that may alter the life and situation of the persons being addressed (Hupe and Hill 2007, 283; Lipsky 2010; Miaz and Achermann 2021, 4). It is through their actions that policies – whether they are migration laws, welfare policies, or other forms of state regulation – become manifest and effective for the people affected by them (Brodtkin 2012). Through their implementation law comes to life (Moore 1978; Calavita 2010). Investigating policies from this perspective thus allows one to ask what members of authorities and other actors have done ‘in the name of policy’ (Wedel et al. 2005, 35).

A crucial focal point for examining the implementation of policies lies in the analysis of discretion (Brodtkin 2012; Baer and Elsuni 2017). As legal texts are often neither exhaustive nor formulated for all eventualities, decision-makers must apply the existing law to often complex situations (Calavita 2010; Lipsky 2010; Miaz and Achermann 2021). In doing so, members of public authorities do not act in a vacuum. Rather, legal frameworks are applied through the complex interplay of different actors (Hawkins 2003; Halliday et al. 2009; Miaz and Achermann 2021). More specifically, decision-making authorities often depend on other actors who produce and provide the knowledge they require for their decisions and their legitimacy (Hawkins 2003; Rosset 2019). Considering the decision-making process, I thus follow Keith Hawkins in understanding decisions as ‘serial decision-making’: ‘What is described as a “decision” finally reached is sometimes nothing more than a ratification of an earlier decision or set of decisions made in the handling of a case’ (2003, 197).

Based on these insights, I investigate the intersectional dynamics at play in placement decisions with a focus on both the discretionary practices of street-level

bureaucrats and the interplay of different actors, narratives, and discourses in a decision-making process. According to Jenkins,

[the] discretionary nature [...] permits the inevitable entry into the process, whether explicitly or implicitly, of a range of social categorizations which in principle should be irrelevant (gender, 'race'/ethnicity, age, sexuality, models of respectability, and so on).

(Jenkins 2000, 18)

It is thus through these relational and discretionary practices that discriminatory attributions and stigmatising categories can find their way into official decisions (Baer and Elsumi 2017; Achermann 2018). However, it is also important to note that laws themselves are not neutral texts and that family policies rather reflect social imaginaries about the 'good' family (Baer and Elsumi 2017; Purtschert 2019). They establish the circumstances under which the state will intervene in families. The next section provides some insights about how these processes played out in Swiss civil law during the 1960s and 1970s.

### Legal Framework and the Swiss Interventionist State

In Switzerland during the 1960s and 1970s, the authorities responsible for deciding on placements according to the Swiss civil law were guardianship authorities and legal guardians (Schoch et al. 2020). Based on the Swiss Civil Code (SCC), two avenues existed for the guardianship authorities to decide on placements: First, until the revision of the law in 1978, all children whose parents were not married upon their birth were automatically put under *Beistandschaft* (tutelage).<sup>2</sup> The *Beistände* (tutors) were to represent the 'interests' of the child in paternity proceedings or regarding the payment of aliments.<sup>3</sup> In the majority of cases, this tutelage was extended to a *Vormundschaft* (legal guardianship) either directly or shortly after the birth of the child.<sup>4</sup> This led to a situation where unmarried mothers and their children were observed systematically by the responsible authorities, which in turn resulted in major discrimination towards families that did not correspond to the patriarchal and respectable heteronormative family norm of the time (Droux and Czaka 2018). In their position as legal guardians, the latter could propose placing the child in a foster family or an educational home – regardless of whether the parents consented to it or not. Formally, however, the guardianship authority had to approve the measure.<sup>5</sup> Second, the local guardianship authorities themselves could decide to intervene in a family and place their children in a foster family or an educational home, even if they were under custody of one or both parents. For this purpose, they could refer to one of the following three provisions of the 'child protection measures': Minor interventions such as an *Erziehungsaufsicht* (educational supervision); placement, if the children were considered 'endangered' or 'neglected'; or the withdrawal of parental authority.<sup>6</sup> These child protection measures could be applied to all underage persons – ranging from newborns to 19-year-olds, as until 1996, the age of majority was set

at 20 years (Dubler 2009). These measures thus concerned babies, children, and teenagers alike.

Historically, the introduction of the SCC in 1912 and with it the child protection measures marked a decisive change in the Swiss welfare state towards a ‘strengthening of the intervention state’ (Germann 2014, 5). For the first time in Swiss history, the state’s responsibility for the upbringing of children was explicitly enshrined at the federal level (Schoch et al. 2020). The introduction of the child protection measures came at a time where the perceptions of childhood were experiencing a shift; that is, throughout Western Europe, children were increasingly viewed as the ‘synecdoche for a country’s future’ (Moeller 2002, 39), which emphasized their well-being and upbringing. For many authors, the child protection measures nevertheless had a certain ambiguity: What was to be protected were both the children *and* society from supposedly harmful influences (Lengwiler et al. 2013; Droux and Czaka 2018; Gabriel, Hauss, and Lengwiler 2018). One such influence was considered the problematized sexuality of underage women. I demonstrate this in my empirical discussion, which follows the presentation of my research methodology in the next section.

## Methods and Data

In this chapter, I focus on an analysis of various archival data that I collected from different archives in the canton of Bern between 2018 and 2021 as part of a broader study conducted for my PhD thesis.<sup>7</sup> Following the principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1996), the data collection process was iterative. I started in the archives of four different institutions, approaching the material inductively without prestructuring considerations. Two of the institutions were educational homes that admitted boys, while two were educational homes for girls.<sup>8</sup> The *Personendossiers* (personal files) often provided insights into the arguments and reasons that were given for the children’s placement in the home. I then ‘followed’ these placement processes back to the city and communal archives to retrace the decision-making process.<sup>9</sup> The city and communal archives hold the files of the local guardianship authorities, including the minutes of the authority and, in some cases, the case files of the persons addressed. Moreover, the files of the welfare authorities are stored in some archives, in which I also had the opportunity to contrast the placement decisions for the home placements with other decisions made by the same authority.

The collected data were analysed continuously through a coding and memo-writing process (Strauss and Corbin 1996; Charmaz 2006), for which I used the qualitative coding software MaxQDA. Starting from the idea that placement decisions were the result of ‘serial decision-making’ (Hawkins 2003), I not only considered the final decisions of the guardianship authority but also analysed reports, correspondences, and other documents from other actors and authorities. My aim was to understand placements as a process, from the first articulation of a perceived problem to the placement decision and its eventual revocation. In doing so, I mobilized two central Grounded Theory principles – namely the constant *contrasting of data* and the *asking of questions to the data* (Strauss and Corbin 1996). I considered

the different actors' perspectives within a placement process as well as contrasted the different placement processes with each other.

The following discussion of one specific case of child placement is the result of this continuous analytical condensation. It is based on the analysis of the personal files concerning a young woman, which I retrieved from two archives. The analysed material consists of the archival data of the educational home in which the young woman was placed (retrieved from the state archive of the canton of Bern)<sup>10</sup> and the guardianship authority's file on her (retrieved from the city archive of Bienne).<sup>11</sup> As I aim to demonstrate, the analysis of this case provides exemplary insights into the intertwined practices and discourses through which young women, their intimate partners, and their parents were assessed and categorized within and through the processes that led towards a placement in the 1960s and 1970s in Switzerland.

### **'Dangerous' Relationships**

While examining the files of the guardianship authorities and those in the archives of the educational homes, I came across various arguments that had been mobilized and the various pathways that had led to the placement of children and youth.<sup>12</sup> One particular aspect quickly became evident: While the archival files of the girls' homes revealed how invested the authorities were in controlling and disciplining them for their sexual activities, I could not trace the same logic where boys were concerned. In line with international findings (Ericsson and Jon 2006; Vehkalahti 2017), some authorities were concerned with the sexuality of young men, especially when they were accused of homosexual acts. However, compared with the arguments in the girls' home admissions, they remained rather scarce, which underlines the gendered dynamic that informed the problematization of sexuality.

Furthermore, throughout the archival documents, I did not find a single case of a young Swiss man placed in an institution after engaging in an intimate relationship with an Italian – or any other non-Swiss woman for that matter. It was always the other way around: Young Swiss women were judged for engaging in 'improper' sexual relations, which were condemned even more strongly if they had engaged in such relations with non-Swiss men. In an admission form for one of the two girls' homes, for example, the guardianship authority stated that a 14-year-old girl had 'run away from home to meet Italians'.<sup>13</sup> In a different admission to the same home, another guardianship authority argued that a 13-year-old girl was 'sexually endangered' since she was 'looking for contact with Italians at every occasion'.<sup>14</sup> In yet another case, a 15-year-old girl was admitted after having had 'intimate relations with numerous men, mainly Italians'.<sup>15</sup> All of these decisions occurred between 1967 and 1973 – at the height of the political debate on 'overforeignisation'.

How did the authorities come to admit the concerned girls to these institutions? To unpack the complex intersectional dynamics at play and the interwoven bureaucratic processes that led to the placements, I focus on one specific case: the placement of Anna J.<sup>16</sup> I argue that providing a close reading of this decision-making process enables one to disentangle both the intersecting categorizations and the contexts in which they are situated (see Brodtkin 2012). Furthermore, the placement

process that concerned Anna is not only exemplary regarding the reason why she was admitted to an educational home. As we will see, it is also illustrative of the different dynamics and logics that lie at the heart of placement processes per se.

### *The Placement Process of Anna J.*

Anna J. was born in 1954 to an unmarried Swiss woman. She was first placed under tutelage and then shortly afterwards under guardianship. From then on, the assigned (male) guardian had the task of monitoring the circumstances in the family and regularly reporting to the guardianship authority on Anna's situation. Throughout the years he served as her guardian, he compiled the file that I accessed during my research in the Bienne city archive. It tells the story of the many interventions that shaped Anna's administrative biography – how she was placed in different foster families and homes during the first years of her childhood and how in 1961, at the age of 7, she moved back in with her mother and stepfather.

While reports by the guardian in the years after Anna returned to her family are infrequent, they intensified in 1970, when she was 15 years old. In February 1970, Anna ran away with a female friend from school. After the pair were reported missing, the police began an investigation to find them. Finally, the two girls were found by the police in Basel, a city in the northwest of Switzerland. According to the police, they were found in a 'room of [male] Italians' whom they had met at the city's train station. Furthermore, and even more importantly for the guardian, Anna seemed to have had sexual intercourse with one of these men. This incident led to a variety of assessments from different actors, which I discuss in more detail in the following paragraphs.

After being brought back to Bienne, Anna was questioned by a female police assistant. In her report, she stated that Anna 'admits to having been used by the Italian in Basel'. Interestingly, instead of inquiring whether any violence had been involved – as the phrase 'having been used' might suggest – she proceeded to question Anna about whether she had had other intimate relationships in the past. Even though she did not inquire explicitly about prostitution, it seems that the police assistant was first and foremost interested in Anna's sexual behavior and whether she would engage in – what at the time were considered – 'immoral relationships'.

After the police intervention, it seemed already clear to the guardian that Anna could not return to her family. He admitted her to the *city youth home* – a temporary admission facility that was intended to host 'endangered' youths while deciding where they should be placed. The goal of Anna's stay at the youth home was to have her assessed and, ultimately, to decide what the consequences of this incident should be. The guardian took Anna to a gynaecologist to have her examined for a possible pregnancy as well as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). This highlights what scholars have demonstrated for various contexts, namely that women having extra-marital sex were often suspected to be in prostitution and, more broadly, that female sexuality is the object of intrusive and stigmatizing societal control (Skeggs 1997; Zambelli 2023). These assumptions are even more striking as Anna was only 15 years old at the time, which could instead have opened considerations of her

vulnerability. Moreover, the STD test is reminiscent of how 'deviant' sexuality and (alleged) prostitution were perceived and regulated in Switzerland and beyond (see, e.g., [Ericsson and Jon 2006](#); [Zambelli 2023](#)). Sexual intercourse – especially when it contradicted patriarchal norms of premarital chastity and was with men considered 'foreign' – was seen as 'dirty' and 'unhealthy'. It thus seems as though the guardian sought to investigate whether the young woman's (national) virtue had been 'spoiled' from the intercourse with a 'foreign man'. This invokes both imaginaries of (white) purity and respectability ([Collins 1998](#); [Lavanchy 2015](#)).

In addition, the suspicion of prostitution was also evident in the assessment of Anna's parents: After some weeks in the youth home, the youth welfare service of Bienne addressed Anna's guardian.<sup>17</sup> The service had heard that Anna's parents had contacted 'the Italian' in Basel and that they had arranged for Anna and him to meet:

The Italian with whom [Anna] had sexual intercourse in Basel occasionally stayed with the [J.] family and visited [Anna] in Bern with them on Sundays. We consider these activities of the parents [J.] to be *Zuhälterei* [prostitution].

Although there was no indication of money being involved, the facilitation of contact between Anna and the Italian man was clearly condemned, as were the parental capacities of her mother and stepfather. The report of the youth welfare service further illuminates the broad monitoring of the parents' actions and how the accusation of (female) prostitution found its way into the bureaucratic process from yet another angle.

In addition to the clinical examinations and condemnation of her parents, the guardian submitted Anna to an assessment through an educational counsellor.<sup>18</sup> The counsellor's report presented to the guardian what can be considered an all-round view of the life and situation of the young woman and her family: It started with an anamnesis on her birth and the first years of her life, and went on to narrate how she had spent several years in an educational home and lived in a foster family for a while. The report considered how she performed at school and whether she 'obeyed' her parents. Furthermore, the counsellor included his own observations: 'During the examination, the patient showed little capacity to communicate, the basic mood was dull and uninterested. Her facial expression was not very intelligent, her speech undifferentiated'. This impression was complemented with both an intelligence test and an electroencephalogram.<sup>19</sup> Based on these assessments, the educational counsellor argued that 'brain damage' was likely and that her intelligence was 'below average', which reflects eugenic discourses that linked bodily assessments with presumed 'deviant' behavior ([Mottier 2008](#); see also [Bland 2025](#)). Referring to Anna's alleged relation to the Italian man from Basel, the educational counsellor stated the following:

The mother has made contact with [Anna's] Italian boyfriend and intends to continue supporting this relationship. She does not realize or does not want to realize the obvious dangers of the relationship. Basically, she would probably be happy if [Anna] got married as soon as possible.

Even though the terms ‘boyfriend’ and ‘relationship’ were now used, thus marking a difference from the accusation of prostitution, the educational counsellor evidently strictly condemned the relationship and with it the actions of Anna’s mother.

The guardian’s report is illustrative of how psychiatric and moral diagnoses as well as gendered and racialized categorizations overlapped in this process (see also [Bühler and Ducommun 2023](#)). In combining seemingly natural scientific test results with the moral diagnosis of the ‘obvious dangers’ of the relationship, its condemnation is charged with what was seen as expert knowledge at the time. The educational counsellor thus provided the necessary information and scientific legitimation for the guardian to decide that Anna should be removed from her family.

In addition to the rigorous assessment of Anna’s sexuality as well as her cognitive abilities, the reference to the young man as ‘the Italian’ is striking. The documents produced during these months of assessments and negotiation – by the police, the youth welfare service, the guardian, and the educational counsellor – are haunted by this racialized and gendered figure. This is all the more remarkable because the authorities could have also referred to the fact that the man was older than Anna, who was still underage, and that he had had sexual intercourse with her after knowing her for only a short time. However, to put forward their respective arguments against the relationship, it seemed sufficient to simply refer to the man as ‘the Italian’. Apparently, the gendered racialization of the man trumped any other consideration – or subsumed it.

In this process, the nationality of the man became more than a mere reference to his presumed national belonging – it also became a metaphor ([Foroutan 2016](#)) for the ‘dangers’ that he and the relationship posed to Anna and, more crucially, to society and the nation. This also explains why marriage was not considered an option in this case. It is in the naturalization, homogenization, and hierarchization of this national category (see [Hummrich and Terstegen 2020](#)) that I see the racialized imaginaries of the overforeignization discourses reverberate. The momentous classification of the relationship as an ‘obvious danger’ was based on the intersection of nation, race, and gender ([Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993](#)) but also informed by disability and class ([Ericsson and Jon 2006](#); [Mottier 2008](#)).

Eventually, the direct consequences had to be borne by Anna and her family. Both the guardian and the educational counsellor argued for Anna’s permanent placement in an educational home. Taking a variety of arguments into consideration – namely the situation in the family as ‘never having been ideal’, Anna’s poor performance at school, and the fact that she had run away and slept with ‘an Italian’ – the guardian-ship authority reached the conclusion that

[the parents] blatantly failed by contacting the Italian in Basel, accommodating him in Bienne and driving with him to Bern and bringing him together with [Anna] without the knowledge of the [educational] home’s management and guardian. They believed they had to promote and ‘legalize’ the relationship so that a marriage would be possible in the foreseeable future. With this behaviour, the couple proves their incompetence as educators.

With this argumentation, Anna's placement in the girls' educational home was decided – and could not legally be revoked unless the guardianship authority approved of it. Ultimately, this highlights two critical aspects: First, the decision of the guardianship authority underlines the ascribed tasks of the family towards their underage daughter – namely that 'proper' parenting involves controlling their daughter's sexual relations, including by preventing her from having 'improper' intimate relationships with racialized others (see [Zambelli 2025](#)). Second, judging the parents as incapable, the guardianship authority saw the need to intervene as legitimized: If parents did not control their daughters, then state actors were 'compelled' to intervene. This demonstrates that, in fact, state actors seemed to transpose what they considered to be parental duties to their own repertoire of governing. Notions of 'good parenting' were translated into notions of 'good governing' – which ultimately resulted in the regulation of interracialized relationships through placement decisions.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I set out to investigate the regulation of interracialized intimacies in the field of family policies that concerned underage women and their families in the Swiss canton of Bern. Even though the SCC did not explicitly mandate the control of the sexual relationships of young women through child protection measures, representatives of the state indeed did so in placement cases such as that of Anna J.

Based on the close reading of the placement process that concerned Anna J., this chapter adds to the discussion on the many ways in which relationships were interracialized, problematized, and regulated. To understand these practices, I argue that it is necessary to dive into the complex processes through which legal frameworks such as child protection laws were implemented. In Anna's placement process, different actors and their expert status provided the necessary grounds for the intersectional construction of the problematized relationship between a Swiss woman deemed to have 'lesser intelligence' and 'the Italian' as well as the disqualification of her parents. These assessments and categorizations were situationally produced and made effective through the 'serial decision-making' ([Hawkins 2003](#)) of the different actors involved, which allowed the racialized discourses on overforeignization of the time to enter the practice of child placements.

The analysis of these decision-making processes has further highlighted how the interracialization of intimate relationships is intertwined with other categories, especially class and disability (see also [Bland 2025](#)). Thus, examining what can be considered micro-practices of street-level bureaucracies allows us to shed light on the question of how larger dimensions of social inequality and power operate and reproduce (see also [Brodkin 2012](#)). The present discussion underlines how deeply the governance of families and the governance of the nation were intertwined during the 1960s and 1970s. To further this conversation, I call for a continued analysis of family policies, including how they were implemented and, ultimately, how their implementation shaped the nation.

**Notes**

- 1 In 1970, 54% of foreign residents in Switzerland were Italian citizens (Wanner 2001).
- 2 Art. 311 para. 1 of the SSC of 10th September 1907. Apart from the SCC, placements could also be ordered on the basis of criminal law – or be decided by the parents themselves (see also Lengwiler et al. 2013).
- 3 Art. 311 para. 1 SCC.
- 4 Art. 311 para. 2 SCC.
- 5 Art. 421 SCC.
- 6 Respectively, Arts. 283, 284, and 285 SCC.
- 7 Through a multi-perspective approach, my PhD project reconstructed 170 placement processes between 1960 and 1980 in the cantons of Bern and Ticino, as part of a wider research project titled ‘The “Good Family”: Normality and its Vicissitudes in Swiss Welfare after 1950’ conducted within the National Research Program (NRP) 76 ‘Welfare and Coercion’. The project was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) (project number 177391). Additionally, my PhD was funded by a Doc.CH grant from the SNF (project number 199877). This chapter is based on chapter 4.4 of my thesis (Ducommun 2023). The NRP project was cleared by the Ethics Committee of the canton of Bern.
- 8 These were *Schulheim Aarwangen* and *Schulheim Ried* for boys and *Mädchenheim Kehrsatz* and *Mädchenheim Viktoria-Stiftung* for girls. Their archives are part of the state archive of the canton of Bern, where educational facilities and homes were often segregated by gender in the 1960s and 1970s (Germann 2018).
- 9 This led me to conduct research in the city archives of Bern, Thun, Bienne, and Langenthal as well as in the communal archives of Grindelwald, Köniz, Langnau im Emmental, and Unterseen.
- 10 State archive of the canton of Bern (StABE), Verein 17.102, file ‘Anna J’.
- 11 City archive of Bienne (SABB), file ‘Anna J’.
- 12 Here, I am unable to go into detail about the many reasons and arguments mobilized for deciding on a placement in the 1960s and 1970s. For an overview, see Ducommun (2023).
- 13 StABE, BB 02.10.24, Zöglinge B, file AK. All of the cited archival documents were in German, and I translated them into English.
- 14 StABE, BB 02.10.25, Zöglinge C-E, file AB.
- 15 StABE, Verein 17.106, file BC.
- 16 All cited names are pseudonyms.
- 17 In addition to the guardianship authorities, the welfare authorities in the canton of Bern were central actors in placement processes (see Ducommun 2023).
- 18 During the 1960s and 1970s, the Bernese *Erziehungsberatung* (educational council service) played a crucial role in assessing children and counselling families, schools, and authorities on children’s education and upbringing (Bühler and Ducommun 2023).
- 19 Electroencephalography is a medical method that measures the electrical activity in the brain and was often used to determine the presence of epilepsy (see Hafner 2022). In those years, in the canton of Bern, it was widely used to assess children’s presumed ‘deviance’.

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