Managing arguments in social work encounters

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Abstract

Meetings between social workers and clients in child protection are highly sensitive and frequently contested. Much is at stake in terms of protecting identities and ultimately possibly child removal. It is not surprising then that disagreements occur and strong positions are defended in encounters between social workers and clients. In this paper, the authors use a combination of a case study approach and micro sequential analysis. The case study approach captures how arguments are produced and managed across successive social work encounters over a longer period of time. Additionally, the sequential analysis of one encounter demonstrates the relevance of discourse and conversation analytic concepts such as categorization, entitlement and accountability for a more detailed understanding of how argument and disagreement manifest themselves interactionally. The interactional sequence involves a family supervisor and a mother in the Netherlands. The paper examines key features of an argument in the context of child protection and engages with the interactional consequences for both worker and client. By providing insight into how arguments unfold over successive social work encounters, the paper contributes to an understanding of how stalemate positions come about and are resolved (or not). Adding to the picture, a detailed understanding of the real-time management of disagreement in interaction is useful in fostering social work practitioners' awareness of how argumentative "logics" may be taking over.

Keywords: child protection, discourse analysis, case study, argumentation, resolving conflict

Introduction: work with involuntary clients

Social work has for the most part been associated with helping people who are willing to be helped, with traditions of providing charity, advocating for citizens' rights or offering a therapeutic service. In child welfare, there is often a coercive and intrusive character which might be seen as at odds with the profession's traditions of helping, advocacy and self-determination. Rooney (1992, p. 13) notes that whilst much social work education aims at developing insights with motivated clients, in practice clients are "often more interested in escaping the clutches of my agency and the law". Similarly, Ferguson (2011, p. 164) notes "values of empowerment and partnership working are inevitably compromised by the constraints placed on service users and practitioners by the statutory role". Where governments are reluctant to use the law to enter the home, social work has stepped in, "aggressive yet non-coercive, persistent yet friendly" (Margolin 1997, p. 89). Margolin (1997, p. 86) discusses a concept of 'aggressive social work' described by Overton in 1952:

> In the past "if the family was not willing to be served, the case was closed". Now, social workers "must go often enough, stay long enough, go despite rebuffs, discourtesy, frank hostility and nonchalant denial of need or wish to use the service".

Child welfare work often involves parents and carers, who do not choose to be clients, either because they have been mandated by courts to be subjected to social work contact and surveillance or because social workers are charged with investigating signs of concern identified by other professionals or the general public. Consequently, as MacKinnon (1998) notes, most child protection investigations are adversarial. Social work interventions are often with clients who do not accept either the assessment of the problem or the justification for the intervention, or both, but the system aims to establish agreement, and cooperation (see also Verhallen, 2015).

Research projects in the UK, USA, Canada, Ireland and Australia have documented the experiences of parents, carers and young people to unwanted social work interventions, which Buckley, Carr and Whelan (2011, p. 102) summarizes as "difficult, intimidating and often humiliating". Kemp et al. (2009, p. 106) report: "emotions ranging from guilt, fear and related passivity to anger and outrage". Turnell (1998) considers that "paternalism remains the dominant paradigm" and Douglas and Walsh (2009) report a "child rescue approach" at the expense of collaboration with parents. Parents find child protection systems mystifying (Kemp et al., 2009), with little opportunity to challenge the workers (Dumbrill, 2006; Verhallen, 2015), insufficient information (Douglas & Walsh 2009) and the formality of social workers hard to understand (Corby et al., 1996; Verhallen, 2013). Buckley et al. (2011, p. 101) describe parents' experiencing a child protection plan as "a coercive requirement to comply with tasks set by the workers rather than a conjoint effort to enhance their children's welfare". Despite recent policy initiatives to develop partnership approaches, Buckley et al. (2011, p. 106) found that differences in perception between workers and families

were such that "the term 'need' cannot be assumed to have a universal connotation".

The response of the parents/carers is generally reported as 'reluctant compliance' whereas the social workers require explicit cooperation (Corby et al. 1996, p. 483). Corby et al. (1996) found parents presented themselves at case conferences as cooperative, avoided conflict with professionals, and felt unable to challenge professional assessments. Whilst some parents acknowledged their behaviour needed to change, "their compliance with expected tasks was often given grudgingly" (Buckley et al. 2011, p. 105). Only a small proportion sought to refute an allegation (Buckley et al. 2011). Dumbrill (2006) also found few parents who challenged the workers' formulations, as they felt they were unlikely to be successful. Most "played the game by feigning cooperation to placate workers" (Dumbrill, 2006, p. 33).

Other forms of resistance have been reported in social worker-client interaction: misalignment with the social workers' aims, for example, forgetting (Muntigl & Choi, 2010); passive resistance, for example lack of acknowledgment in interaction (Juhila et al., 2014); resisting the expectations of the intervention, for example "refusing confessional practices" (Trethewey, 1997).

In summary, research evidence suggests that social worker-client encounters in contexts like child welfare are characterized as adversarial, with difficult and strained encounters compromising the development of relational practice. Consumer studies suggest that parents/carers most often respond with various forms of reluctant compliance or passive resistance, assuming that direct challenge or confrontation will make matters worse. At the same time, social workers look to cooperation as a sign of successful engagement. Whilst these studies display similar findings, most rely on interview or focus groups methods. Few studies examine client participation in detail by examining the character and unfolding sequence of the social worker-client meetings in child protection (exceptions include Hall & Slembrouck, 2001; Van Nijnatten, 2006), so that it is not clear how compliance and conflict develop over the length of the social work intervention and how they are managed in actual encounters. This paper will address this gap by offering a combination of ethnographic case study and analysis of interactional detail, in order to provide a greater understanding of the complexities in these meetings akin to Geertz's (1973) notion of thick description. We will examine the case of a mother and her 13-year son who was placed in care, providing a narrative of the unfolding events over a two-year period as told by the mother, observation of meetings, and a detailed study of one meeting with the social worker. First we describe the research methods.

Methods

In this paper, two ways of capturing social reality, case study and turn-by-turn analysis, are combined to develop a more comprehensive take on social-interactional processes and their outcomes, examining the dimensions of categorization, entitlement and accountability.

Whilst the sequential analysis of small fragments of interaction is normally justified on the basis that a disagreement is acted out in relation to what is currently 'on the table', we suggest that it is possible, indeed likely, that disagreement and

conflict on critical issues may have lingered in the background, surfaced earlier or been disputed on previous occasions. Indeed the history of previous disagreement(s) is often tropicalized in a meeting by being revisited and formulated anew in the current context. Consequently, our turn-by-turn analysis draws on the case study to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the interdependent dynamics of both larger and smaller time sequences of social activity within the context of a particular disagreement: not only, how is the disagreement introduced in the meeting and managed in interactional real-time, but also how do the interactional dynamics relate to longer standing positions of conflict in the case? Such an approach accords with the more longitudinal perspectives promoted by ethnographic enquiry while, as Van Nijnatten and Suoninen (2014) report, orienting analytic effort to connections that might else remain invisible to the researcher or disappear from sight.

Case study approach

A case study comprises a detailed investigation of the phenomenon under study and provides an analysis of the context and processes involved (cf. Meyer, 2001). We use it to capture and understand the ins and outs (the *emic*) of the complex processes in which social work and child protection services are delivered to a family with multiple needs. The strengths of a case study lie in "descriptions that are complex, holistic"; these involve "a myriad of not highly isolated variables; data that are likely to be gathered at least partly by personalistic observation; and a writing style that is informal, perhaps narrative, possibly with verbatim

quotation, illustration, and even allusion and metaphor" (Stake 1978, p. 7). Such an approach is suitable for capturing experience and gathering tacit knowledge so as to make naturalistic claims of how social work encounters occur in practice.

Albeit generalizations cannot be drawn from a case study (see Boeije et al., 2009). Through an insight into a single-mother family from both an emic and an etic perspective (as we as social scientists remain outsiders), we may be able to better understand how (single-mother) families who are subjected to child protection interventions may perceive and experience these processes within the broader context of Dutch society.[1] A case study primarily aims at internal validity by allowing the research participants and interactional "data speak for themselves" (Gould, 1981). This allows concepts, patterns, and processes to emerge.

In line with the purposive sampling method (see also Palys, 2008) the researcher [Tessa Verhallen] adopted the strategy of recruiting thirty single-mother families, including Jeanette's family (a fictitious name of a Dutch mother)[2], independently of the institutional networks of child protection. Jeanette agreed to participate. Certain selection criteria were leading: (1) single-mother families, (2) facing multiple problems, (3) of either Dutch or Curaçaoan origin (see Verhallen, 2015). Verhallen explained the procedure, e.g. issues of privacy, confidentiality and power and knowledge asymmetries (see Verhallen, 2016). Verhallen conducted a longitudinal case study from 2010 to 2012 in Jeanette's family and she met the family on fifteen occasions.

A holistic research design was chosen to capture how family support and child protection measures were carried out in Jeanette's family, as well as the family's

first-hand experiences of this. The triangular approach used to gather data relied on a combination of participant observation of the family's situation, informal interviews and documentation. The following steps in the data collection process were taken. At first, the researcher relied on the informal interview with Jeanette, the narratives of her life history and participant observation of the family (atmosphere, relationship, interaction). Verhallen collected data by making field notes of the observations. The interviews and narratives were either audio-recorded (with Jeanette's consent) and/or the content was written down in a notebook. Furthermore, Jeanette's partner Ray and her son John were interviewed a few times and her network was also consulted (e.g. parents, friends, social workers).

Since Jeanette's family was subjected to child protection orders Verhallen accessed more private data on the child protection interventions, complementing notes with copies of various documents (the case file contains over a hundred documents including official documents from social services, the child protection agency, psycho-diagnostic tests, assessments and judicial decisions; added were diaries, bank statements, newspapers, letters and other test results to complete the picture and cross-check data).

Whenever Verhallen was at Jeanette's home and a social worker, a family supervisor or another state representative visited the family she observed the social work encounters between Jeanette and the state representatives. In addition, she endeavoured to be present during the next encounter in order to capture the (dis)continuity between the meetings so as to assess if what was said/decided or agreed upon in the previous meeting corresponded with the present state of affairs. This meant

that she conducted her fieldwork where the meeting took place to learn more about the different sites where state interventions are put into practice. Besides visiting the home, Verhallen went with Jeanette to office meetings with social workers, the juvenile court and consultations with her lawyer.

Whenever possible, such as in the encounter shown below, an audio-recording device was used to capture the social work encounter to obvious methodological and analytical advantage. Analytically, the conversation could be re-listened to as often as needed to assess which concepts were essential for an analysis of the discourse practices and the process of child protection interventions.

Since a case study approach is ideal for exploring new processes or behaviours that are little understood (Hartley, 1994), and helpful for responding to *how* and *why* questions about a contemporary set of events (Leonard-Barton, 1990), it is particularly useful to contextualize the underexplored question of how disagreements and conflicts in child protection encounters must be understood. A case study must also be open to the use of theory or conceptual categories that direct the research and analysis of data (Meyer, 2001; Burawoy, 1998). Hence, a combined case study-discourse analytical design enables us to scrutinize stalemate positions in social work encounters both holistically and through fine-grained analysis which is theoretically informed (Rampton, 1999).

Analytic concepts for turn-by-turn analysis

The turn-by-turn analysis of the encounter is informed by conversation analysis

(e.g., Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Schegloff, 2007), while drawing on a number of theoretical concepts that are relevant to understanding this type of interaction – notably categorization, argument and disagreement, accountability and entitlement. These we define and outline in more detail below, along with the need to attend to relevant time cycles in the context of micro-interactional sequence already referred to above.

Mäkitalo (2014, p. 27-28) observes how research into categorization practices highlights important elements of social work practice, especially its role in case construction, "the process through which a person is transformed into a client of a particular kind". While the deployment of a category in interaction allows the speakers to take certain things for granted, categorization is equally about rendering some aspect of social reality particularly relevant (Mäkitalo, 2014). For Mäkitalo, categorization is concerned both with knowledge and resultant action in an institutional or professional framework.

In terms of institutional practice, an important reason for concentrating on disagreements over candidate categorizations of person, event or situation is that disagreements are often not resolved but end in stalemate positions (Leung, 2002). How did we get to the point of stalemate, and what happened next? In answering these questions, we suggest that we concentrate on how categories are being raised, hinted at, negotiated, challenged, undermined or dismissed. Candidate categories which are worked up in interaction thus function as 'bids' and this will typically be followed by responses signaling (dis)agreement, qualification, etc. Categorization practice counts as successfully accomplished when it is dis-

played by an interactant and acknowledged by co-interactants. It is unsuccessful when developed into endless conflicting particularization, as indeed will be illustrated in our data.

In our turn-per-turn analysis of excerpts from the office encounter, we examine the interactional resources which speakers deploy to establish and recognize displays of meanings, with specific reference to, in this case, how disagreements over the application of a category are made manifest. A key feature of an argument, as a type of sequence, is the occurrence of an opposition which minimally involves an arguable turn and an oppositional turn (Jenks et al., 2012). In her detailed literature review, Scott (2002) observes that disagreement research has tended to concentrate on the role of specific moves or speech acts within short one-on-one exchanges, with much less attention being paid to the relevance of longer sequences which can be identified in terms of emerging and evolving disagreements. Also questions of timing need to be considered (see Hall and Slembrouck, 2014) for a similar point with regard to advice-giving). Scott (2002) notes that the foregrounding of disagreements occurs along a continuum of increasing explicitness and escalating hostility. This may range from "a collegial stance" over "personal challenges" to "personal attacks". Similarly, Jacobs et al. (1991) highlight how the chaining out of arguments and counterarguments involves the display of "morally tinged elaborations", often addressing the moral implications of previous arguments. Sequential analysis of disagreement sequences also invites attention to the deployment of specific interactional strategies in the conduct of an argumentation (e.g. denials, complaints, rejections, evaluations, etc.).

Knowing how to position oneself and categorizing a case in institutionally relevant ways is important to become recognized as a legitimate knower (Hitzler, 2011). Categorization practice thus needs to be viewed in the context of professional accountability (Hall et al., 2006; White et al., 2009), with the latter defined as the routinely accomplished, demonstrable capacity to account for the deployment of or appeal to a particular category, in response to an interactional or institutional demand. According to Garfinkel (1967), ordinary institutional activity is routinely imbued with the condition of accountability: the possibility that one may have to account for one's actions informs the ways actions are performed; hence, actions routinely anticipate the possibility that one may be held accountable.

If the professional's position as an expert knower is central to understanding interactional behaviour in institutional contexts, then its major contestant is the client who is uniquely equipped with first-hand experience of the circumstances to which particular categories pertain. An important field of tension must be noted between various "possessors" of relevant knowledge. While experts are routinely equipped with expert vision and models for diagnosis, clients will be uniquely equipped with local knowledge about person, case and circumstance. As such, the presentation of the 'truth' is subject to struggles over who is able to claim s/he is in a position to hold certain knowledge (Heritage & Raymond, 2005) as well as how people are able to present their accounts as a valid representation of reality (Potter, 1996). How do professionals pursue emerging professional categories, in the face of a client who outrightly challenges the category that is being posited? Epistemic

asymmetry has particularly featured in the literature on advice rejection, in the words of Park (2012, p. 2005): "overt rejection of advice by claiming independent knowledge or giving accounts of their life circumstances that the advice does not fit". According to Shuman (2005) entitlement disputes come with a shift of focus to the responsibilities of the speaker: the accuracy of the evidence becomes less important than the propriety of who is reporting to whom. Entitlement is then both about ownership of experiences and the prerogative to narrate them.

Finally, there is the important question: does the disagreement get resolved? And, if so, what settles the opposition between position and counter-position? Often, there is no resolution to the disagreement, but there is some sort of silencing and uncomfortable acceptance of difference (Leung, 2002). Is such a stalemate acknowledged during the interaction, on or off the record? Quite apart from noting the importance of interactional stalemate, what does a disagreement mean in the longer-term perspective of an intervention or series of contacts between client and professional? Wortham (2005), in particular, stresses the role of time scales in the realization of significant outcomes of social processes. Relevant to our discussion here is how analytical attention to the height of noted disagreement relates to the actual outcomes of interventions over a longer time period. While disagreements may result in interactional stalemate, they do not necessarily feed directly into subsequent decision-making. From the point of view of professional practice, there may be a particular self-deception in the need to pursue disagreements in a particular way.

Results: the case study

Jeanette is a 42-year divorced mother of John who is 13 years old. John is placed in care with foster parents in 2011, but said "I want to live with my mother" (interview with John in 2012, and stated in a signed letter sent to the juvenile judge in 2012). According to Jeanette her relationship with her new partner Ray is good and therefore she thinks that John should come home (interviews with Jeanette and Ray in 2012). Jeanette's opinion is that the case seems to have become more and more complex over time due to their changed family circumstances, her resolved conflict with her ex-partner, institutional changes (there are new family supervisors and social workers involved in the case), lengthy bureaucratic processes and procedures, and institutional mistakes being made in the past which still have an (adverse) effect on the here and now (several interviews with Jeanette in 2012).

In 2010, contact with the current family supervisor Anna (who is circa 20 years old)[3] was according to Jeanette better than it is now in 2012. Their relationship changed as a result of Anna's decision to relocate John from institutional care to a foster parent family "with urgency" (interviews with Jeanette in 2010, 2012). Jeanette is still devastated about this and disagrees with the action. Also in the encounter between Jeanette and Anna that is the focus of the turn-by-turn analysis below the urgency of John's relocation is discussed. Later in this encounter it will seem that the underlying motive to relocate John lies in the fact that Ray would have been verbally aggressive to a social worker involved in the family by stating that she lied.

Now Jeanette believes that John's placement is the beginning of an abrogation of custody and fears that John will be permanently placed in foster care. Jeanette is currently desperate about her and John's situation and feels depressed but she does not give up and strives for John's return home, while coping with the situation as best as she can (several interviews with Jeanette in 2012).

Around the time of the meeting the researcher interviewed Jeanette informally more than ten times, Ray a few times and John twice. In the course of studying Jeanette's family, the researcher was able to observe and witness a few home visits of the family supervisors in 2011 and 2012. It was striking that Jeanette became more suspicious of the social workers over time; by meeting the social workers at their offices she could "maintain her privacy" and "gain control" (interview with Jeanette in 2012).

The child protection case was initiated voluntarily. In 2008, Jeanette asked for help because, in her view, John had developed suicidal tendencies. Since Jeanette was very worried about John's wellbeing, he was placed in a psychiatric unit for young children with problems. Here, John got treatment and was examined further by psychologists. In addition to having developed "suicidal ideas", he appeared to have "a personality disorder" (official referral documents in 2010 and 2011). During John's placement in a psychiatric unit, the relationship between Jeanette and her ex-husband Peter deteriorated. According to Jeanette this was largely related to John's difficult situation, Jeanette's new home situation (a new partner and his children had moved in), and the question whether John would return to either his father or mother after the period in institutional care. Jeanette wanted him to return to her (new) family, but her ex-partner, Peter, didn't want John

to live together with other children and a new partner, and wanted John to move in with him instead.

Since the conflict between Jeanette and Peter did not seem to get resolved, Jeanette initiated assistance from a youth care agency in order to serve best the interests of John and to mediate between herself and Peter. She convinced Peter that it would be better if the family would get assistance from a youth care agency. Hence, on Jeanette's behalf, a family supervisor was appointed by the juvenile court to implement a supervision order. Jeanette voluntarily asked for a (compulsory) supervision order from the state to help John and his family because she and Peter were unable to handle the difficult situation that has arisen. The coerciveness of the supervision order became noticeable when in a report in 2010, which was intended for the Child Protection Board to assess Jeanette's family situation and to inform the juvenile judge concerning any further action (e.g. prolonging the supervision order), it was stated that "John's suicidal tendencies developed during his placement in a psychiatric unit as a result of the tensions between his parents" (official referral document in 2010). On the basis of the "indication" in the referral document, the juvenile judge decided to extend the supervision order. Hence, John was not allowed to return to Jeanette, and, it was furthermore decided to place John in foster care.

Jeanette disputes this version of the truth. According to her, John developed suicidal tendencies long before his placement in a psychiatric unit due to among other things bullying at school. In Jeanette's view, she is a good mother because she asked for help in time by initiating institutional care. She acknowledges that during John's place-

ment tensions between her and Peter developed (but not John's suicidal tendencies). This is why she wanted to get help from the youth care agency. Jeanette is of the opinion that if the situation had been described differently at the time by the family supervisor in the referral document (not Anna), John would have never been placed in foster care.

In the view of Peter, Jeanette and John, it was due to the attitude of the family supervisor towards the family that the situation got worse. In their view, the family supervisor often wrongly depicted the situation or what was said in reports. When the family asked to correct "these errors" their remarks were mostly ignored: they were sometimes added as an opinion but the official text remained the same. In the view of the family, 'seeking the truth' was very important for a fair and honest process but according to the family supervisor, and social services in general, "they are not seeking for the truth" (email correspondence in 2011, see also the Netherlands Child Ombudsman, 2013). Hence, the state of affairs was often disputed both in email correspondence and during encounters, and issues of injustice, guilt and blame functioned as accelerators in the child protection process.

In the meantime, Peter and Jeanette resolved their conflict and they began to work together against the agency – although Jeanette is more negative about the agency than Peter is. She felt that the agency saw more possibilities in John returning to live with Peter than with her. Some support of her point of view can be seen in official reports observed in 2011 and 2012 where she is depicted as "uncooperative", "verbally aggressive", "manipulative", "hostile" and "threatening" (citations in official documents in 2011 and 2012). These reports

were produced by the family supervisor on the basis of the first contact or based upon the reports produced by representatives of the psychiatric unit where John resided.

In addition to the ethnographic case, we now turn to the analysis of the interactional sequence. It has been taken from a two-hour conversation between Jeanette and Anna in August 2011, a key stage of the case, when the dispute over the causes of John's 'suicidal tendencies' emerged as a focus of the disagreement.

Turn-by-turn analysis of the encounter

We chose to use the sequence below because it most clearly demonstrates the interactional dynamics between Jeanette and Anna, and moreover explicitly reveals how arguments are produced and managed through categorization. The occasion is an office meeting at the youth care agency. The first author was present as a participant observer and took notes which complement the audio-recording. The excerpt has been translated from Dutch into English.

Additional information is added between brackets (on the basis of field note indications of verbal delivery, tone, gaze and bodily conduct). Earlier in the conversation, Jeanette and Anna talk about the Christian god. Jeanette confronts Anna with citations from the Bible and insinuates that Anna is lying when she states that Anna does not tell the truth in the reports. This underlines our earlier point that disagreements often result in morally tinged observations. In this respect, Jeanette wants to pursue this topic but Anna wants to move on and discuss other things. She moves to close down the topic.

Seeking a workable agreement

The first nine turns see the social worker attempting to establish an agreement to manage the current impasse. At this stage it appears that Jeanette is unhappy about the report but the nature of her challenge has not been clarified. Anna seeks Jeanette's agreement that two parties can have different points of view, i.e. different categorizations, and she suggests a way forward: you say what's wrong, I write it down, and then decide whether it is right or wrong (turn 1). Note that the social worker will only 'think about' the mother's version, indicating which version is likely to be reported.

Jeanette does not immediately accept this proposal, as it may merely mean that the social worker will continue to misinterpret her point of view: 'twisting words' and 'pulling them out of context' (turn 2). Such personal attacks (Scott, 2002) display the morally-tinged character of the argument sequence and Jeanette resists such a concessionary move. She seeks Anna's acknowledgement that this is the social worker's practice: 'you know that's the case' (turn 2). The social worker provides no such acknowledgement and persists with her proposal, and requests that Jeanette states her point of view. Jeanette remains reluctant to proceed as suggested. Two moves signal insistence (turns 4 and 6). At turn 7 Anna on her part insists, with an equally strong counter move. The turn can be read as seeking agreement with the proposed way forward but also as a possible threat to the client that her lack of agreement is not an appropriate way to act: 'is this the plan?' In this section the client is being depicted as not merely argumentative but as obstructing possible resolutions. This section can be seen as an attempt by the social

After 33 minutes in the conversation:

Anna: […] but that does not detract from the fact that someone else might see it differently. That that is not the case and that's why I want to invite you to tell me what's wrong according to you then I will write it down and then I can even think about it is right or is it wrong but it is possible isn't it possible that two people have different views

Jeannette: Uhm yes absolutely this is possible. But you are twisting words you pull them out of their context and you know that's the case

Anna: Er well go ahead and say

Jeanette: Ok

Anna: Yes?

Jeanette: Er…

Anna: [interrupts] Is that what we are going to do? Is this the plan? [threatening: intonation rises]

Jeanette: Uhm, there are a few things left that I want to discuss, Uhm

Anna: [interrupts] Shall we then choose what we are going to do now? [threatening: intonation rises] Otherwise I have later, at 3.30, the feeling that….

Jeannette: Yes, that….

Anna: What do you want?

Jeanette: I am just looking at it [turns a page of a report] [3 seconds pause]. Eh, this is funny…. So now it suddenly says that he had suicidal tendencies in 2009. [5 seconds pause] And every time you've said that he only had these during [name of psychiatric unit in 2010]. So you have now corrected yourself?

Anna: [Surprised: intonation rises at the end of the question] On which page is it?

Jeanette: Page 1, at the bottom, no, page 2, at the bottom.

Anna: [Looks it up, and reads it out softly][inaudible]: diagnosis…

Jeanette: So it said: 'crisis, that he might jump out of the flat'. That is suicide, isn't it?

Anna: It does not say that, but this is, this is… [Confused: stumbling words and looks astonished] [3 seconds pause] how it happened, right? A crisis arose because John made such remarks, and that you then called the emergency service.

Jeanette: But it was in your opinion JUST A remark?

Anna: It, it does not say that. It only says that this actually happened.

Jeanette: Is this a suicidal tendency or not?

Anna: I dare not comment on this.

Jeanette: Ok, I [personally] do want to comment on this. John had very serious suicidal tendencies.

Anna: Hmm

Jeanette: And that's why, this is one of the things about which we have always asked for the truth. Because this is actually, has actually nothing to do with an opinion.

Anna: [while writing]: Moment, wait a moment, suicidal tendencies and before that you wanted…?

Jeanette: [interrupts] BEFORE THAT, I had already contacted [name psychiatric unit] because I was seeing some signs. Already before this crisis arose.

Anna: And what do you want then, about this, to be included here [in the report]?

Jeanette: Well, until now you have always said it wrongly. Because it has always been said that when he was in [name psychiatric unit], that he developed suicidal tendencies at that time. And that this had to do with the tensions between [his] father and mother. And based upon this, every time you succeed in putting him in care.

Anna: But this report does not say here whether it was a suicidal tendency or not? [one second pause]

Jeanette: Then, it is about time that you put it into it. You can also ask his father.

Anna: But my question [is], what is the problem? Is it that it does not say after the sentence: it was in fact a suicidal tendency?

Jeanette: [interrupts] The problem is that you all say that he became suicidal BECAUSE OF the tensions [between father and mother] while he was residing in [name psychiatric unit].

worker to establish an alignment (Goffman 1981): to establish a structure for the rest of the interaction, with strong direction and explicit instructions, 'well go ahead and say' (turn 3). This is further emphasized at turn 9 where the social worker uses her next engagement both to imply criticism of the time taken up by Jeanette's obstruction and the need to move forward. There is further insistence at turn 11: 'what do you want?' We see the social worker attempting to open up the scope of the disagreement, but she is facing strong reluctance from the client.

Making a claim about a category and its specific features

In turn 12, Jeanette points to a particular part of the social worker's report describing an incident in 2009, which she claims indicates suicidal tendencies in John. Such an assessment is at odds with the social worker's recurrent formulations that the suicidal tendencies had started in 2010. Jeannette ironically contends that this indicates the

social worker has changed her mind: 'you have corrected yourself' (turn 12). She further emphasizes that 'jumping out of the flat' can be equated with 'suicidal tendencies'. The tag question, 'isn't it', functions to establish affiliation with an obvious entailment (turn 16).

Over the next few turns the social worker and client inspect the text for evidence and its interpretation. First, is the comment merely a remark with no pragmatic weight? Second, does it lead to a reformulation of John's mental health? In turns 17, 19 and 21 the social worker challenges any such claim by stating that the information cannot be taken for more than what it says on the page ('it only says that this happened', turn 19). In the report there is no interpretation of its significance, and in fact she is clear that she cannot make such an assessment (turn 21). At stake here is the categorization of John as suicidal inclined, and whether there is enough evidence to justify the attribution of John's state of mind to the category.

Extending the claim

The social worker's line when attempting to close the discussion with a strong rejection of any willingness to confirm such a link ('I dare not comment on this', turn 21) is perhaps that she is not equipped to make such an assessment or does not feel such an attribution is relevant. Either way it does not appear to encourage the sort of affiliation Jeanette is seeking. This is met with the mother's parallel formulation, stating the opposite: 'I do want you to comment' (turn 22).

The interpretation of the suicidal tendencies is now made to bear on the intervention as a whole. Epistemic asymmetry is now at the forefront and it extends to chronological accuracy. Jeanette claims entitlement to privileged knowledge of the child: 'John had very serious suicidal tendencies' (turn 22). Her detailed knowledge of her son's behaviour is displayed in turn 26 and stated with emphasis ('BEFORE THAT I had already contacted agency because I was seeing some signs, already before the crisis'). The social worker now concedes to the claim and asks what is to be included in the report (turn 27). Again she appears to be seeking agreement but in a more limited way, by merely adding Jeanette's opinion in the report.

It is worth noting that during this exchange there is a discrepancy about what is being talked about, including the weight which is to be attributed to the added information. In turn 25 Anna is writing down the mother's comments and asks for clarification, 'and before that you wanted?' For her, it is a matter of mere administrative record. In contrast, Jeanette takes the words 'before that' to mean before the social work intervention, indexing that for Jeannette

the truth of the nature and justification of intervention is now at stake (cf. Sarangi & Slembrouck 1996: 119 on "warrior clients" whose resistance focuses on the application of social and moral principles, even at the expense of favourable procedural outcomes).

Stalemate

Jeanette now states her position in the most complete form, starting with accusation that the social worker has always displayed an incorrect formulation of the facts. The contested logic is summed up in an incremental list of three: John was in a particular institution, he had suicidal tendencies and these were a result of tensions between the parents. Such a formulation, Jeanette contends, has wrongly been the basis for his previous admissions to care and now she is resisting any blaming for John's mental health.

Anna continues to dispute that this is in the report, to which Jeanette provides an immediate riposte 'then it is about time you put it in' (turn 30). This displays the way in which the protagonists in the argument do not so much interrupt one another as to be acutely aware of what the other saying. They carefully monitor and respond immediately to the other's turn. Anna continues to locate the discussion in terms of merely adding appropriate wording to the report (turn 31). Jeanette now interrupts Anna and delineates 'the problem': all the professionals have blamed the suicidal tendencies on tensions between the parents.

We can see at the end of this extract that Jeanette has been developing her arguments, seeking truth and challenging the professional formulations in order to mit-

igate any blame for John's mental health. She invokes privileged knowledge of John: not only did she first identify the early signs and approach the agencies, she is now able to use the social worker's own report to identify the suicidal tendencies as occurring before the reports of marital tensions. As demonstrated by Heritage and Raymond (2005), the use of a tag question cedes epistemic authority to the next speaker while also making the accuracy of the statement the immediate matter to be addressed. In this case, by stating 'Is this a suicidal tendency or not?' (turn 20), Jeanette positions Anna as competent to make an assessment of suicidal tendencies based on the written report and invites her to confirm or deny this. In this she is also anticipating any professional challenge to the child returning home which might be formulated in terms of previous marital tensions. However, rather than dealing with the diagnosis of suicidal tendencies, Anna shifts the focus to only what the report says, and explicitly avoids denying or confirming the diagnosis, saying: 'I dare not comment on this' (turn 21).

Conversationally, the argument has been not resolved. Whilst the social worker has been persuaded to consider changing the wording of the report, she does not provide online recognition of Jeannette's category-specific formulation of the case.

Types, tokens and their relative weight

Although the category is being undermined, it is nevertheless maintained. Jeanette wants Anna to make corrections about the timing and origin of her son's suicidal tendencies, as she had noticed these

'signs' (as she calls them) before her son was placed in care. John's suicidal tendencies were, according to Jeanette, the reason why she asked for help from the institution in the first place. This is a categorization which appeals to the privileged knowledge a parent possesses; it preceded the one in the report and marks the actions of a responsible parent who acted in the interest of the child. As described by Raymond and Heritage (2006), Jeanette's declarative utterance asserts that she had direct access to John and is therefore in a position to assess his state of mind at that time: 'John had very serious suicidal tendencies' (turn 22). In addition, as an alternative to the unjustified attribution contained in the report, a characterization which recognizes the validity of the initial motives would have resulted in a situation where the child was not put in care. The latent accusation is that an institutional course of action went against the characteristics which informed its initiation in the first place.

Hall and Slembrouck (2001) in an analysis of a case conference note the way in which the social worker uses instances of characterization to index a pattern, while the client is restricted to comments on the particular instances that would make up the pattern. Here the client is trying to use an instance to re-formulate a category: 'John already had suicidal tendencies', but the social worker resists such a move by refusing to link the instance to the category. Ultimately social workers have control of the overall professional formulation – they assess needs and risks, and the evidence which constitutes such formulations. As mentioned in the introduction, social work writers expect social workers to listen to the client's point of view and take on board certain small points and 'negotiables' (Rooney

1992), but the social worker remains in control of the definition of the situation. In this respect Anna's position can count as professionally accountable as she listens to the client's point of view but ultimately she maintains a monopoly over professional judgment.

Outcome

Once an interaction becomes argumentative, speakers are often trapped in a negative spiral, each oppositional move becomes the next arguable action (Maynard, 1985; Hutchby, 1996). Arguments are hard to resolve. The most common result is a 'standoff', with no compromise being reached. How does the 'standoff' at the end of the encounter relate to what happened next?

In 2012, both Jeanette and Peter want John to live with Jeanette, and also John wants to live with his mother, but he is placed in care with foster parents. John has acknowledged in an interview that he does not like living with his foster parents and he has run away a few times to Jeanette's house. John is very persistent and stands up for his rights. This includes a letter to the juvenile judge to make clear what he wants. He knows his rights (he also has his own lawyer). In the last court meeting of 2012, the juvenile judge's recommendation that the parents draw up a plan for a co-parenting arrangement may be taken to anticipate a subsequent decision that John can go and live with Jeanette again. Going against this interpretation, the youth care agency wants to first investigate the parents' past, their capabilities and intelligence before the next court meeting. In Jeanette's opinion this is the agency's way to obstruct the

family's case (email correspondence 2012). Following the agency's insistence on a capabilities test the situation between Anna and Jeanette could only get worse. Due to the pressure of John and his lawyer and also Jeanette's advocates, the parents' capabilities are not tested in the way the agency proposed. John's opinion is heard in court and adopted by the juvenile judge and, with the judge's approval, he returns to live with mother, albeit initially under supervision (judicial decision in 2013). While the disagreement between Jeanette and Anna is not resolved, the actions of others determine the direction of the categorization process with corresponding decisions.

Conclusion and discussion

Our presentation of the case study demonstrates how a conflict may unfold over a period of time and the turn-by-turn analysis illustrates how attempts by a parent (Jeanette) and a family supervisor (Anna) may be unsuccessful at resolving the conflict. Specifically in relation to the turn-by-turn analysis, as highlighted by Van Nijnatten (2005), Anna treats the official report as primary. When Jeanette tries to correct an aspect of it which she considers to be quite central to the case, Anna attempts to deal with it through recording Jeanette's views, without altering the official record. More specifically, whereas Jeanette tries to have her son's statements upgraded to a category of 'suicidal tendencies', Anna works to downgrade them to 'remarks'. The case study illustrates how Jeanette's attempts to correct the official record are translated into negative evaluations of her behaviour – such as "uncooperative" and "hostile".

Arguably, these function to undermine the client's account.

Furthermore, we can see how, interactionally, Jeanette invites Anna to agree to the diagnosis of 'suicidal tendencies', bolstering her account with her first-hand knowledge of her son, whereas the family supervisor explicitly refuses to comment on this. In this way, the analysis illustrates a struggle over epistemic authority (Heritage & Raymond, 2005), showing on the one hand a parent's strategies for challenging conclusions about her son, and on the other hand illustrating how a family worker may purport to resolve the conflict while actually creating a stalemate. Moreover, the analysis illustrates how facts are created discursively and interactionally, with significant consequences for the people involved.

The conflict between Jeanette and Anna might be seen as an extreme example, with resentment becoming entrenched. However, many of cases in the Dutch data archive were characterized by similar disagreements and argument (Verhallen, 2015). Other cases with less of a rehearsed conflict may display more instances of reluctant compliance (Corby et al,. 1996). Even so, Knijn and Van Nijnatten (2011, p. 237) consider that recent developments in Dutch policy and practice display "a tendency toward more repressive interventions". They further consider how "open-ended and vague concepts such as stimulating child development create a growing tendency to assume that parents a priori do not know what is best for their children, or how to behave in their best interests". Here, we suggest that cooperation and coercion are fluid and not fixed, as they might change over the course of the intervention. This particular meeting demonstrates that the positions of the family supervisor and parent shift through the use of categorization and entitlement, suggesting how and when authority/coercion and support/rights are clarified.

Social work writers promote the concept of "good authority" which is "ethical because it uses authority in a skillful, empathic yet forthright manner, which is in accordance with standards of justice, but essential to keeping children safe" (Ferguson, 2011, p. 171). It is assumed that the needs of and risks to the children can be appropriately identified by professional assessment. Certain actions by parents and signs in the children's behaviour are unequivocally dangerous and provide a justification for intervention. Clearly some children are harmed, emotionally, developmentally and physically by their parents, and social and psychological assessments attempt to identify harm and risk. However such evidence needs to be tested. The case study demonstrates how firm action and authoritative assessment did not produce evidence which stood up to legal scrutiny, and the child returned home. The turn-by-turn analysis demonstrated that how the social worker listened to, even encouraged, the client's perspective, but did not change her formulation of the case. What counts as 'evidence' is affected by power differentials. Within child protection processes, the pressure to make agreements means that cooperation by the client becomes itself an issue in the formulation of the case. Being able to challenge professional categorizations is not merely limited in terms of what counts as accepted evidence, but also how it is interactionally possible to make a case. It is not only 'who knows best' but also 'whose knowledge counts'.

In most cases, parents in child protection procedures are not defendants in a crime investigation with the associated

rights to be represented and scrutiny of evidence. Devine and Parker (201, p. 10) note the parents' "vulnerability". For Dickson (2009), the law and professional ethics collide in child protection, for example in the way that parents are coerced into agreeing to the removal of their children under voluntary arrangements. Strong pressures to obtain cooperation and avoid litigation mean that due process is not followed, potentially compromising accurate factual determination and the scrutiny of social work intervention (Sinden, 1999). Pollock et al (2015) voice similar concerns that coercive power in child protection is subjected to "the checks and balances of due process" (p. 167), but conclude that it can be justifiable to protect the child, while persuasion is rooted in the worker being prudent, understanding and reasonable. Systems may also have to become less intent on establishing definitive versions of a case but keeping options open in recognition of "the increasing pervasiveness of uncertainty and insecurity amongst professionals and those with whom they work" (Parton 1998, p. 23). Parton (1998) adds the need to rethink "the nature of professional judgment and the way in which relationships between users and social workers are (re)framed" (p. 23).

Finally, our case study and sequential analysis suggests an approach to research which fosters interactional awareness about the dynamics of disagreements and their significance in the light of the larger intervention as a whole. Further research is needed to explore the representativeness of the depicted processes in other case contexts. In addition to its epistemological value, the combination of case study and sequential analysis also has potential as a strategy for professional development.

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