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# Conversational contexts

## Investigating the dynamics of relationships between clients and professionals in child welfare

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### Abstract

The effectiveness of interventions has become an important object of scientific study in child welfare and often a prerequisite for funding of child welfare programmes. Many studies on the effectiveness of interventions aimed at supporting families at risk and behavioural change of youth have suggested that features of the relationship between professional and client, and the characteristics of the professional, are decisive for the interventions' effectiveness. There are, however, few studies of what is important in terms of relational skills, personal characteristics or communication strategies. In this special issue, we focus on the dynamics of relationships between child welfare workers and clients (i.e. young people and/or their parents) by using direct observation and close analysis of naturally occurring processes. The contributions to this special issue have a 'bottom up' and a 'top down approach' in analysing relationships. The first part uses a 'bottom up' approach and reports on conversations between youth and family treatment parents in treatment homes. Using a 'top down' approach, the second part specifically focuses on Motivational Interviewing skills of care professionals in their interactions with youth. The third part covers the interactions between parents and professionals in the context of child protection using a 'bottom up' approach.

**Keywords:** youth, parents and care workers, professional communication skills, interactions, observations, conversation analysis

## Introduction

'... it is the therapist's ability to forge a collaborative relationship with the client that is predictive of outcome' (Baldwin et al., 2007, p. 38)

During recent decades, the effectiveness of interventions has become an important object of scientific study in child welfare. Proof of effectiveness is often a prerequisite for funding of child welfare programs. As with evidence based medicine, child welfare interventions are supposed to be based on the best available knowledge in the context of professional standards. Many studies have been published on interventions aimed at supporting families at risk and the behavioural change of children and adolescents. They are often designed to measure the relation between elements in the interventions and the behaviour and attitude of children and families. Significantly, many of these scientific studies have suggested that features of the relationship between professional and client, and the characteristics of the professional, are decisive for the effectiveness of such interventions (Green, 2006; Harder, Knorth & Kalverboer, 2013; McLeod, 2011; Shirk, Karver & Brown, 2011). However there is little examination of what is important in terms of relational skills, personal characteristics or communication strategies.

To facilitate professional performance in child welfare, we need to focus closely on the relationship between clients and their helpers. In this special issue, several studies are presented that investigate the relationship between clients and professionals in the context of child welfare. In these studies, the relationship between child welfare workers and child welfare clients is consid-

ered as a communicative practice. Of course, child welfare offers material facilities: children are received in residential facilities, families are visited by social workers, and child welfare agencies receive governmental funding. Yet these facilities all become reality as discursive practices, that is to say they become actualized in how users act and interact. Our interest in this special issue is how child welfare encounters are managed during conversational exchanges.

Much of what we know about processes in child welfare stems from studies that are based on questionnaires, interviews and other indirect methods. Although we may learn much from these studies, the problem is that such knowledge is based on what people involved tell researchers about these practices rather than the practice itself. The construction of questionnaires decontextualizes the primary process and produces formalized knowledge. The statistical interpretation of coded categories often misses the contextual complexity of such encounters. This may be one reason that child welfare professionals complain that scientific evidence is difficult to operationalize and misses dilemmas of daily practice.

Direct observation and close analysis of naturally occurring processes, we suggest, tell us more about the dynamics of the relationship between clients and professionals. Therefore we present here studies that take a close look at interactions between child welfare workers and child welfare clients (i.e. young people and/or their parents). The studies draw on discourse analysis (what is said) and/or conversation analysis (how it is said) of conversations between workers and clients (Hall et al., 2014). Such studies have become common in the domains of health care (Heritage & Maynard, 2006), psychotherapy (Silverman, 1997; Peräkylä, Anta-

ki, Vehviläinen & Leudar, 2008) and legal settings (Heffer, Rock & Conley, 2013) but are still rare in child welfare. These studies throw light on the linguistic practices in child welfare, which is to say that they show the nature of pedagogical encounters, changing behavioural strategies, feedback mechanisms, delicate management of sensitive issues, such as out-of-home placements, and dealing with client resistance.

The goal of this special issue is threefold. First it is the presentation of several studies on the professional client relation in child welfare that examine the dynamics of that relationship in interventions. Second, it is a call for more attention to research which examines talk and interaction in child welfare. Finally, the studies aim to contribute directly to the improvement of child welfare practices by enabling professionals to examine their own talk and interaction.

## Contributions

The contributions to this special issue have been divided into three parts. The first part reports on conversations between youth and family treatment parents in treatment homes. The second part specifically focuses on the skills of care professionals in their interactions with youth in care from a Motivational Interviewing (MI) perspective. The third part examines interactions between parents of youth in care and care professionals in the context of child protection conferences and social work.

## Conversations between youth and family treatment parents in treatment homes

In the first paper, Schep, Koole and Noordegraaf examine various ways in which *adolescents* take the initiative and gain attention from professional parents to start a telling. They used video recordings of conversations between adolescents and professional parents in six family treatment homes in the Netherlands. In these homes, a professional parental couple takes care of one to four out-of-home-placed children, as well as their own children. The authors used conversation analysis to analyse video data of dinner conversations.

The results show that adolescents use four types of initiatives to tell something to their professional parents. The first are 'out of the blue' initiatives concerning experiences of the adolescent that do not follow logically from what has already been said or done. The other three initiatives by adolescents (i.e. 'topic shifts', 'topic continuations' and reactions to current events or objects) are related to an ongoing topic or activity. The types of initiations seem to produce different kinds of sequential responses from the professional parents. The contribution of Schep et al. underlines the importance of sensitivity and responsivity of treatment home parents for building and maintaining an affective relationship with adolescents (cf. Baldwin et al. 2007; Harder et al., 2013; Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2010).

Using a comparable 'bottom up' approach and the same video data as in the previous paper, Van Nijnatten and Noordegraaf look into pedagogical practices of the *professional parents* coaching adolescents in family treatment homes. Just like biological parents, professional parents have to deal with

growing adolescents who during a large part of the day spend their time out of home, out of their sight. To keep informed about their doing and wellbeing, parents have to rely on what the adolescents tell them. The authors analyse the strategies parents use in conversations with adolescents to obtain pedagogical relevant information. Van Nijnatten and Noordegraaf analysed over 300 hours of video-recordings of 15 parent-child interactions in six family treatment homes and selected 156 interactions. Both parent-initiated and adolescent-initiated conversations were analysed. From the 156 interactions they selected fifteen interactions in which (upcoming or past) activities are discussed that seem to have an anamnesis goal: to collect information on the children's life and on their wellbeing.

The findings show that professional parents used the following four practices to keep informed by the adolescents: soliciting, sounding, suggesting and advising. The adolescents' perspectives and ambitions tend to take the lead, and only seldom were surpassed by parental directives. This is similar to doctor-patient discourse that is characterized by the professional's intention to achieve patient autonomy within the context of medical and social boundaries and opportunities (Heritage & Maynard, 2006).

### Care professionals' skills in interactions with youth

Compared to the study of Van Nijnatten and Noordegraaf, Whittaker, Forrester, Killian and Jones specifically focus on the *professionals* in interaction with youth. In contrast to the previous two studies, Whittaker et al. use a 'top down' approach by applying Moti-

vational Interviewing (MI; Miller & Rollnick, 2013) as a framework for analysing conversations between youth and professionals in social work practice. MI is a "collaborative conversation style for strengthening a person's own motivation and commitment to change" (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 12). MI is an 'evidence based' communication style for which a well-developed body of research suggests that it is associated with positive client outcomes (e.g. Lundahl & Burke, 2009; Jensen et al., 2011).

Whittaker et al. developed a system for rating seven key elements of child and family social work practice. Their rating system consists of four domains of skills from the Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity (MITI) code and three domains that relate to appropriate use of authority by professionals. The seven domains were used to score 133 audio recordings of direct practice. The authors conclude that it is possible to reliably measure key elements of social work communication, which is a first step in building a model of good practice.

A MI approach was also applied by Eenshuijstra, Harder, Van Zonneveld and Knorth. Their study focuses on MI in the context of residential youth care. They aim to analyse observed interactions between adolescents and group care workers during one-on-one conversations. In contrast to Whittaker et al. who mainly focus on professionals, this study focuses on behaviours of both *care workers and adolescents*. The study specifically focused on MI skills applied by care workers and adolescents' motivation for change.

Their audio recordings of 27 conversations show that care workers most often use MI non-adherent behaviours in terms of 'persuasion without permission' and 'confronting' when they try to change ad-

olescents' attitudes or behaviours. MI adherent behaviours, i.e. 'being affirming', 'seeking collaboration' with and 'emphasizing autonomy' of the adolescent, are rarely used by the care workers during the conversations. In terms of motivation for change, adolescents equally use change and sustain talk and often respond neutrally to care workers. Change and sustain talk by the adolescent does not consistently follow MI adherent and non-adherent behaviours of care workers, and vice versa. An important implication is to examine the implementation of MI training to residential care workers, because MI non-adherent behaviours are ineffective in changing client behaviours (Apodaca & Longabaugh, 2009).

### **Interactions between parents and care professionals in child protection**

In the fifth paper, Verhallen, Hall, Slem-brouck and Kirkwood examine a case study concerning the communication between a family supervisor and the mother of a young person in care, selected from an archive of 30 single-mother families in the Netherlands. They analyse in particular the management of disagreements, both over the course of two years of social work intervention and in turn-by-turn interaction sequences in one meeting. In child protection, relations between social workers and parents are most often characterized by conflict (Buckley, Carr & Whelan, 2011; MacKinnon, 1998). In meetings, positions are proposed, and contested, with much at stake in terms of protecting identities and defending formulations. In this paper, the case study approach captures how arguments are produced and managed across successive social work en-

counters over a longer period of time. The sequential analysis of one encounter demonstrates the relevance of discourse and conversation analysis. The argument concerns opposing views of the child's emotional problems (categorization), who is to blame (accountability) and who has the authority to make claims (entitlement). How claims are proposed and challenged involves drawing on institutionally relevant categories and their associated attributes. As is frequently the case, the argument is not resolved resulting in stalemate (Leung, 2002), however there are differing opportunities to influence subsequent outcomes.

By providing insight into how arguments unfold over successive social work encounters, the paper contributes to an understanding of how conflicts and disagreements can be managed and perhaps more sensitively managed, if not always resolved. 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.

In the final paper, Koprowska aims to find explanations for the difficulties of care workers to achieve *parental participation* and engagement. She specifically focused on what happens with parents during child protection conferences to better understand how communication is accomplished in these complex and difficult situations. The twelve conferences studied by Koprowska make life-altering decisions concerning the families involved with regard to neglect or emotional abuse of children below the age of twelve. During child protection conferences, the child and his or her safety and welfare are central topics, but parents' lives and abilities are also discussed.

By observing and analysing the talk of parents and professionals during the 12 conferences by conversation analysis, Koprowska found that professionals use strategies such as indirect speech, politeness and minimization of speaking of discomforting information in the contact with parents about 'difficult' topics. She also found that professionals use reference switching: switching between talking about a family to directly speaking to a family member during the conferences. Koprowska concludes that far-reaching effects might be achieved by small and subtle differences in strategies of professionals to enlarge parental participation during child protection conferences.

### Top down and bottom up

As can be seen in these descriptions, the studies show a basic methodological difference in their paradigmatic approach. The studies of Whittaker et al. and Eenshuistra et al. use a 'top down' approach from a MI perspective in analysing the dynamics of relationships between youth and professionals. In these studies, child welfare practice is seen as the result of relational features that can be formalized and rated by independent observers, independent from consideration of the context of the social work dynamics. The advantage of this approach is that relationships in many child welfare interactions can be analysed, leading to a critical intersubjective consideration of what happens in these relationships. The other studies by Van Nijnatten and Noordegraaf, Schep et al., Koprowska and Verhallen et al. all use a 'bottom up' approach., meaning that the child welfare dialogue and its complex context is taken as starting point for analysis. This approach examines actual interactions rather than par-

ticipant's representations, and is inductive rather than deductive (Hall et al., 2014).

Both the 'top down' and 'bottom up' studies included in this special issue have tried to specify the dynamics of the relationship between professionals and clients in different care contexts. Considering all six papers, it emerges that professionals' social and communication skills and the awareness of their role in the interactions with youth and parents are important for achieving positive relationships with clients. By observing and analysing interactions, the studies show how professionals respond to initiatives by young people (Schep et al.), collect information on children's life and wellbeing (Van Nijnatten and Noordegraaf), apply communication skills in social work practice (Whittaker et al.) and during one-on-one conversations with youth (Eenshuistra et al.), manage arguments during conflicts with clients (Verhallen et al.) and use communication strategies in their contact with parents (Koprowska).

By closely examining the subtleties and strategies of professionals, we can better understand what features are effective and ineffective in interactions with clients and how positive outcomes can be achieved with youth and parents in child welfare (cf. Karver, Handelsman, Fields & Bickman, 2006). Since features of the relationship between professionals and clients, and the characteristics of the professional are important for the effectiveness of interventions (e.g. Harder, Knorth & Kalverboer, 2013; McLeod, 2011), we call for more attention to studies examining interactions between clients and professionals in child welfare. With direct observation and close analysis of care processes, we are better able to understand how outcomes are achieved and what works for whom.

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