Abstract

In the context of the changing relationship between children, parents and the welfare state, professionals have to deal with notions of the “child at risk”. In child welfare and protection, the issue of normative judgement in (risk) assessment and documentation is an essential area for exploration for social workers. We examine the practice of report writing in which future professionals exercise power while assessing, documenting, and judging the child as “at risk”. We report on a study about a fictional social work case conducted with 152 students in Belgium, in which we developed a rhetorical analysis of the “terministic screens” used in writing reports.

Introduction

Western welfare states have recently given greater consideration to what causes harm to children, implying a renewed interest and priority given to social work in the field of child welfare and protection to intervene in alarming situations (Parton, 2011). In the context of the rapidly changing relationship between children, parents and the welfare state during the last few decades (Gillies, 2008; Oelkers, 2012), social work has evolved as a welfare practice with overwhelming attention given to disciplining family life in order to protect children as future gold for the nation state (Lister, 2003). Social work professionals increasingly have to deal with moral panics while adressing the notion of the “child at risk” and are required to make decisions about potential threats and risks (Stanford, 2010; Parton, 2011). In this light, risk assessment and documentation have become part of ongoing processes of professionalisation in the complex world of child welfare and protection (Broadhurst et al., 2010). As Hood (2012, p. 6) asserts, the current concern that families may be a locus of risk to children “obviously puts great pressure on assessment and decision making”. As such, the problem of normative judgement in (risk) assessment, documentation and intervention practices is an essential area for exploration (Taylor & White, 2001), especially given the increased demand for public accountability (Horlick-Jones, 2005).

In this article, we focus on report writing as an exemplary practice in which future social workers exercise their power in different ways while assessing, documenting, and judging the child as "at risk". As a specific element of professional assessment and documentation in situations where children might be at risk, report writing implies an interesting practice in which social workers inherently wield considerable power (Healy & Mulholland, 2007). We report on a study conducted with 152 social work students in Belgium, in which we explore the ways in which students construct reports as future social workers in response to a fictional social work case in child welfare and protection, where the notion of the "child at risk" implies the ground and legitimation for intervention (Roose et al., 2009).

Constructing notions of the "child at risk"

In the international context, the notion of the "child at risk" is considered a strikingly ambiguous and ever-evolving concept (Dekker, 2009). Even though the expression "at risk" has only recently been used, the issue of childhood has been linked to possible threats or risks for both the individual and society since the 19th century, causing an inevitable tension between social and individual interests in social work practices (Lohmann & Mayer, 2009). Specific yet ever-changing interventions were designed for various categories of "at risk" children (Dekker, 2009), based predominantly on the underlying assumption that children at risk need to be protected from their so-called "dangerous" and "irresponsible" parents by removing them (temporarily) from their parents based on the legal grounds of child protection (Roose, 2006). As a form of gentle surveillance and social control, these child welfare and protection practices further developed with a focus on disciplining family life to stimulate "good" parenting (Jones, 2002). In his seminal work *Haven in a heartless world*, Lash (1977) asserts that the Western family has historically been perceived as the moral and social cornerstone of a disintegrating society, and as a mechanism for tackling individual as well as social problems. In that vein, he sharply criticises the fact that families were held responsible for the well-being of the child, leading to professionals intruding in the private sphere of the family since the underlying assumption was that the

“family provided indispensable emotional services, (…) yet it performs them so badly (…) that its efforts have to be supplemented by an army of healers” (Lash, 1977, p. 120).

In this context, it has been critically observed that the notion of the “child at risk” is extremely complex, since it can be considered and constructed in radically different ways in child welfare and protection practices (Roose, 2006; Conolly & Morris, 2012). The lives of children and young people are, however, currently increasingly imbued with this ambiguous social construction of the “child at risk”, which is often at the expense of parents who are deemed responsible for the children’s development and well-being (Gilbert & others, 2011; Roose et al., 2014). As Gillies (2008, pp. 95-96) asserts, “parents have always been held responsible for the behaviour and development of their children but recent years have seen a cultural shift in the way child rearing is conceptualized (…) while efforts by the state to shape parenting have an extensive history, they have, recently, scaled new heights”. Parton (2011, p. 855) stresses that “new and sometimes competing ideas about risk to children and the best ways of addressing these” are currently at stake. This might have significant consequences for social work practitioners who are expected to pass normative judgments on complicated family situations, resulting in a rather implicit intensification of power arrangements between social workers and families (Margolin, 1997). The currently renewed focus on the “child at risk” arguably entails a shift for social workers to exerting more surveillance, power and control; moving from “being the ‘soft cops’ of the welfare state to being more akin to ‘hard cops’” (Rogowski, 2012, p. 1222).

A rhetorical perspective on report writing

The renewed focus on the “child at risk” and the associated shift towards social work as a possible instrument of surveillance and control implies that the task of report writing has become a central issue in the debate. Examples of recent public attention on this issue include the deaths of a number of young children under the supervision of social workers in several European countries, for example Victoria Climbie and Baby P in the United Kingdom, and Savannah in the Netherlands. The contemporary focus

on risk assessment and documentation as the basis for developing practical knowledge in social work, and specifically in child welfare and protection, can be understood as a “response to growing fears about risk” (Stanford, 2010, p. 1066). Recently, a range of publications (Healy & Mulholland, 2007; Bogg, 2012) accordingly point to the importance of learning to write reports for both students and professionals in the field of social work. As Bogg (2012, p. 1) argues, report writing seems to be a skill that social workers “are expected to have from the start (…) and yet there is very little in the way of training available. Many social workers struggle to write and prepare reports, a task which can be very complex.”

This reminds us to the centrality of the power of social work professionals (Parton & O’Byrne, 2000) since they write and construct social work reports based on their judgment and analysis of specific and often complicated situations (Hall et al., 2006). Hence, this construction process might involve challenges to professional assessment and documentation, since dealing with the complexity is about more than so-called *objective* risk management tools, checklists and protocols (Horlick-Jones, 2005). This construction process requires reflexivity of social workers in their perceptions and interpretations in assessment, documentation and communication practices (Stanford, 2010; Hood, 2012). Therefore, we approach the practise of writing reports from a rhetorical perspective as this enables us to explore the ambiguities that are inevitably present in the use of language and the attribution of motives to human action in reflexive ways (Blakesley, 2002). Writing social work reports is a language-centred activity (Gregory & Holloway, 2006), and mirrors the perceptions and interpretations of social workers in specific situations in close detail, for instance when social workers construct an image of a client (McLaughlin, 2009). In this vein, Taylor (2006) argues that social work has much to learn from rhetorical analyses of communicative practices in social work, as these analyses have the potential to develop the reflexive practices of social workers (see also Rutten et al., 2010a). She stresses that “social work practitioners, educators and academics need to employ a reflexive approach to their knowledge in order to achieve a critical awareness of their own processes and products” (Taylor, 2006, p. 204).

Concepts such as *reflexivity* and *reflection*, however, have a variety of meanings (for an overview see D'Cruz et al., 2007), but advocates of reflexive practice argue that "significant dimensions of 'theory' are implicit in action" (Taylor, 2006, p. 191). In discussing the relationship between theory and practice in social work, Parton (2000) suggests that the work of Kenneth Burke is useful. In this article, we aim to take this argument further by discussing more extensively the key concepts in Burke's work and by introducing rhetoric as an important and useful perspective for social work education (Rutten et al., 2010a; Rutten and Soetaert, 2013). We will specifically make use of theoretical and methodological ideas developed by Burke.

Kenneth Burke (1966; 1969) approaches human action from a rhetorical perspective, and his "new rhetoric" contributes to our understanding of how and why human beings use rhetoric and to what effect, with human beings described as "the symbol-making, symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal" (Burke, 1969, p. 16). His main question for rhetorical analysis is: "What is involved when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it" (Burke, 1969, p. Xv). According to Burke, every form of symbols we use to describe a specific situation is always a "speaking in terms of" (Rutten et al., 2010b). As such, the concept of *terministic screen* refers to the idea that "the vocabularies that people use allow them to think and to do certain things, but prevent them from doing and thinking certain other things" (Brummett, 2006, p. 180). In a sense, all language ("terminology") that we use constitutes a corresponding "screen" that directs the attention to a particular perspective on complex social realities: "even if a given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality" (Burke, 1966, p. 45). This implies that our use of language is always partial, "it reveals while it also conceals. Even the most precise terms leave out much more than they include. But more importantly, as we select the terms for the debates, we not only select and deflect reality; we also – through our selection – predetermine the possible directions of the debate at hand" (Sumner & Weidman, 2013, p. 866). Indeed, "many of our observations are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations about 'reality' may

be, but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of words" (Burke, 1966, p. 46). With the concept of terministic screens, Burke makes two important points: "First, when we observe the world, we are never truly objective, our observations are already coloured by the terms we use. Our terms *screen* the world, making possible some meanings and terminating others. Secondly, we are often unaware of the *terministic* effect our terms create (...). We use language, but at the same time, language uses us" (Sumner & Weidman, 2013, p. 867).

Research methodology

During a course on clinical assessment practices in the academic year 2012-2013, 152 students in their second Bachelor of social work at Ghent University were asked to watch a short film, "The Sugar Bowl" (Van Mieghem, 1997). "The Sugar Bowl" represents a fictional yet very complicated and ambiguous family situation involving four hypothetical family members: a father, mother, young daughter (Karen), and a dog. Throughout the evolving story-line, a subtle yet very arbitrary suspicion of child abuse emerges, and a diversity of questions about the actors' agency and responsibilities in this situation can be raised that lead to different ways to interpret this social reality. In our study, the short story represented a fictional social work case in child welfare and protection. As Burke asserts, "since the real world of action is so confused and complicated as to seem almost formless, and too extended and unstable for orderly observation ... [there is need for] a more limited material that might be representative of human ways while yet having fixity enough to allow for systematic examination" (Burke, 1955, p. 263). From this perspective, fictional narratives can become 'test cases' for studying (terministic) perspectives on complex social realities (Burke, 1955, p. 263; for an extended discussion on this see Rutten and Soetaert, 2013). The film fragment thus provided a research site to investigate the interpretations of social work students and their suggested ways to act in child welfare and protection by means of constructing a social work report, with a particular focus on their use of language. Within social work research there has been a growing interest in introducing fictional

narratives in educational settings (Rutten et al., 2010a). Our research can thus be situated in a small but growing body of research, which suggests that social work education can be enriched by ‘a knowledge of imaginative literature, particularly fiction’ (Hardy, 2005, pp. 207-208).

After obtaining a written informed consent from 152 students (see Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), the students were asked to individually construct a written report as part of a research project. We framed the assignment as follows: the students were positioned as child and family social workers who were expected to write a report, commissioned by a judge. The reason for this commission was that there were rumours about problems in the family. The students, as social workers, had to go and observe this situation and give feedback to the judge, who would then decide if and what further interventions had to take place, for instance a discussion with the family. As the film only provides limited information about this specific situation and does not allow social workers to draw any definite conclusions, we were aiming for students to be very modest and nuanced in processing the information while dealing with the ambiguity of possible problems shown in the film. Eventually, 152 written reports served as research data.

As a strategy of data analysis, we engaged in a directed approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), as the goal of this theory-driven approach is “to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). Our analysis of the reports was directed by the above mentioned research insights about the role of professionals in the field of child welfare and protection. Research shows that an explicit and determined effort to mould and regulate individual parenting behaviour currently tends to result in an interventionist and disciplinary agenda (Parton, 2011). In this vein, it is argued that parents are held responsible for the well-being of their child and “being at risk” is easily constructed, while professionals in child welfare and protection are expected to walk a tightrope between responsibilising and governing families (Gillies, 2008; Roose et al., 2014). As a way to make sense of this volume of qualitative material, this directed approach to content analysis

was elaborated using empirically based 'feedback loops' (Myring, 2000), which enabled us to support, question, and expand the existing body of research. As such, we used a retroductive coding process and analysis (Seale et al., 2004), which involves an analysis that is simultaneously deductive and inductive. Retroduction implies "moving back and forth between narratives and theory, modifying original theoretical statements to fit into the narratives' part and using pieces of narratives relevant to the emergent theoretical concepts" (Seale et al., 2004, p. 458). While reading and re-reading the reports written by social work students, five interrelated key concepts were identified that may have been manifest or latent in the written reports as initial coding categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005): normalising, moralising, blaming, psychologising, and fantasising. In a further analytical stage, a more in-depth focus on the particular language used by the students was elaborated. The data were clustered according to emerging terministic screens, which allowed us to analyse the *selections* and *deflections* that are present in the written reports (Brummett, 2006). As such, the aim of the analysis was to track down the terministic screens that students create in their respective reports. We explored the five interrelated key themes that often occurred simultaneously in individual reports, based on a more in-depth search for unique examples of specific terministic screens concerning the "child at risk" concept. These examples offered a unique potential to embrace the richness of the data and to illustrate the diversity of meanings attached to the complex and ambiguous situation as represented in "The Sugar Bowl".

Research findings

Normalising

In the reports, a rather dominant social, cultural and historically rooted construction of middle-class family life strikingly emerged. This norm, referred to by Vanobbergen and others (2006) as rigid thinking in terms of the so-called norm of the "one, big happy family," is reflected in the ways in which social work students easily construct the child as a passive victim, being vulnerable, innocent and at risk of

being psychologically scarred; whereas “good” and “responsible” parenting is seen as a norm and a social obligation. In the following example, a terministic screen is created in which Karen is perceived as being a “child at risk”, whose normal development is at risk:

> *It is necessary that child protection intervenes in the situation, so that the mother cannot use her violence any more. This intervention should happen as soon as possible, given the fact that Karen is in acute danger as an innocent victim, and her normal development is at risk.* (Student F.M.)

In the name of “good” parenting, a construction of “bad” parenting is called into existence, which easily leads to a suspicion of child abuse. For example, one of the students refers to the rules of society as related to this norm of proper parenting.

> *The mother doesn’t see any other solution than hitting her daughter when she misbehaves. Yet hitting your child violates the law and children’s rights. And if someone is hitting the child frequently, the law as well as the rights of children prescribe that this ranks as child abuse. Perhaps the mother should manage to deal with educating her child differently, at least in order to conform to the rules in our society.* (Student C. T. O.)

Another example refers to the moment that the father arrives late at home, which provokes the mother’s anger and irritation as she asks him whether he has been drinking. One of the students interprets this as follows, constructing notions of what is “normal” and “abnormal” in the family life:

> *The relationship between Karen’s parents seems to be normal. The couple is, however, often arguing about the father’s excessive consumption of alcohol.* (Student L. G.)

Moralising

The notion of “good” parenting may turn social work into an instrumental strategy. In an attempt to enable the parents to take responsibility, students tend to adopt a moralising attitude. They emphasise

what the parents *should do* rather than raising doubts and questions to discuss with the family members. For example, many students stress, with a moralising undertone, that the ways in which the father reacts to tense situations are to be seen as deeply problematic, especially because Karen is “at risk” of being abused by the mother. Many social work students tackle the father for being unresponsive; they mainly perceive him as irresponsible because he does not intervene between his wife and his daughter and underline that he *should* protect his daughter:

> *Suddenly, the incident happens. When the mother casts her eyes upon the melting coffeepot, Karen hides under the table, terrified of what she knows that will happen. In the meanwhile, the father enters the living room, yet during the first minutes he doesn’t react…. It is just self-evident that an acute intervention is strictly necessary here. He [the father] simply seems to remain ignorant of the fact that leaving Karen alone with her mother can have grave consequences for Karen. The father is, nevertheless, a very important stakeholder, he is the one who can protect Karen when the mother threatens with her fist*. (Student I. D.)

Other students exercise this moralising attitude when they are setting out a clear-cut finality of their intended intervention. Rather than engaging in a practice of report writing that allows for an open-ended and participative process of negotiation with both parents and children, many students claim an expert position. For example, one of the students asserts that Karen *should* listen to her mother and should learn to behave as a “good” child, and that the mother *should* become aware of the problem and *should* shoulder her responsibility towards her child:

> *When Karen is brought to the boarding school by her mother, she is given orders that she should learn to behave as a good child. The mother blames her daughter for the problems at home, yet Karen disagrees with this and runs off. Therefore, they should both quit their destructive pattern of attracting and rejecting each other.* (Student H. W.)

Blaming

In our research, it became clear that social work interventions which tend to follow the above mentioned logic of disciplining family life in order to protect children seem to overemphasise the responsibilities of parents. This often results in blaming parents for being irresponsible in the long run. Preserving the interests of the so-called innocent child who is portrayed as a victim often serves as a central ground for intervention, while the parents are blamed for being irresponsible. As one of the students argues:

> *I do not understand the aggressive and irresponsible behaviour of the mother towards her daughter, since Karen is unintentionally making mistakes. It is normal for children to do this, they always push back frontiers when they are growing up. And it is the responsibility of parents to deal with this in proper ways. Now Karen will develop a very low self-esteem for the rest of her life, all because of the totally wrong, misplaced and outrageous behaviour of her mother.* (Student M. P.)

Blaming parents for the "bad" education of their children frequently happens. For example, the short film starts while the young daughter lays out breakfast to surprise her parents, who are still asleep. The girl puts the coffeepot on the fire before she wakes her mother and father in their bedroom, yet when they enter the kitchen the coffeepot is melting down on the fire. The interpretation of one of the social work students shows a problematic construction in which the student assigned a "she-devil" identity to the mother, blaming her for intentionally and resolutely abusing her daughter:

> *As soon as the mother discovers that the coffeepot has been melting down on the fire, she's frantic. She calls her daughter all sorts of names and pours out the boiling water over her daughter. I cannot consider this as an accident; the mother is deliberately abusing her daughter, both psychologically while humiliating her daughter as well as physically.* (Student P. D. B.)

Psychologising

Although the students are offered a frame of reference that is firmly rooted in child and family social work, they frequently raise psychological and clinical explanations and solutions for the problems. Their terministic screens concerning the daughter often reflect a perspective that is heavily rooted in developmental psychology, for example when the students anticipate how the situation will evolve:

> *Without a doubt, the following questions are essential in considering potential interventions: What would happen to her when there is no intervention at all? This is essential considering the fact that the child will be developmentally, socially and emotionally scarred.* (Student A. D.)

Another social work student suggests the solution of therapy-oriented sessions of anger management for the mother, and if this fails to have results, more drastic interventions are perceived as the best solution without expressing the intention to discuss this with the different family members:

> *The solution implies that the mother follows sessions of anger management, so that she learns to cope with her own frustration…. But if these sessions aren't effective, it is necessary to assign the daughter to residential care in the context of an out-of-home placement, for her own safety. These disciplinary measures against the mother are necessary until she has proved that she is capable of raising her child, and of teaching her the right values and norms without physically abusing her.* (Student J. D. C.)

One of the students suggests assertiveness training for the father:

> *We should take notice of the fact that the father also needs help, I want to suggest that he follows an assertiveness training to ensure that he won't ignore the outbursts of his wife anymore.* (Student K. M.)

Fantasising

Many students fantasise about worst case scenarios in relation to the complicated situation at stake. Rather than including nuanced and tentative information, therefore, many reports show how circular and

self-referential arguments are constructed. One of the students offers an illustration of the way in which a self-referential argument is constructed, regarding the supposed and undesirable mental health disorders of the mother, including the suggestion that an intergenerational transmission of these problems is at stake:

> *The mother suffers from unstable behaviour and mood disorders. I consider this as a potential personality disorder, which requires long-term therapy and a psychiatric diagnosis…. Also the daughter already reacts in terms of physical aggression, which is evidence of an obstinate behavioural pattern.* (Student L. S.)

The majority of social work reports and the implications suggested by social work students are mainly based on fear, which positions them in relationships dominated by suspicion and by moralities of protectionism and responsibilisation. These interrelated dynamics of interpretation give the impression that social work students will be hindered and even prevented from engaging in dialogue with the family in their future practices.

Concluding reflections

In actual configurations of the relationships between parents, children and the welfare state, professionals in fields such as child welfare and protection, education, and early childhood education and care are often caught in a tension between responsibilising and governing families while shaping their practice (Gillies, 2008; Roose et al., 2014; Biesta, 2014; Vandenbroeck et al., 2011). Since notions of risk, and more specifically notions of the "child at risk," operate as powerful discursive constructs for shaping social work knowledge and practice in child welfare and protection, we reported on a research project among social work students in which we examined the practice of writing reports in response to a fictional social work case in child welfare and protection as an example of the complex assessment, documentation and decision-making process in social work (Alasuutari et al., 2014). The reports often

reflect a social construction process in which the “child at risk” is considered as a vulnerable and innocent victim who is at risk to be developmentally, socially and emotionally scarred by the parents who are deemed responsible for the child’s development and well-being. Based on normative constructions of the “one, big happy family” and clinical explanations, our research shows that the report-writing of the students tends to evolve as a practice of truth-telling. As a practice of truth-telling, social work is in search of the correct way to *represent* so-called objective realities in reports (Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2010). Here, high levels of authority and expertise are claimed in well-defined issues (Fook, 2002). Our research shows that the social work students tend to occupy and maintain a privileged power monopoly towards children and parents, and easily moralise and blame the parents. The rhetoric of risk seems to mobilise fear in emotive and rather defensive ways, stimulating a rather unbridled fantasy of social work students that leads very often to the desire to intervene in drastic ways, such as out-of-home placements of the child. During the course, students are enabled to learn that their terministic screens can create moral dilemmas in their future practice, and can undermine their capacity to meaningfully, purposefully and creatively respond to these dilemmas (Titterton, 2006).

As such, there is an urgent need for exploration of the ways in which social workers “can ‘speak back’ to the ‘culture of fear’ that is engendered by the rhetoric of risk” (Stanford, 2010, p. 1068). Dealing with this complexity requires reflexivity of social workers regarding the perceptions, rationalities and interpretations in their practices (Stanford, 2010; Hood, 2012). From a rhetorical perspective, the reflexive writing of reports about a fictional case might be very useful for social work students to reorient their established systems of knowledge and to reflexively broaden their interpretations of particular situations in social work practices (Taylor, 2006). The rhetorical analysis, however, should not be restricted to fictional case studies and further research might focus on the transfer of their insights into specific social practices (Rutten et al., 2010a). This might enable future social workers’ reflexivity in questioning how knowledge is generated which also involves that they acknowledge “their agency in response to situations they face” (D’Cruz et al., 2007, 86). In this sense, professionals may utilise what

Eraut (as cited in Hood, 2012, p. 8) calls “meta-cognition”; “a process of critically reflecting on decisions and actions so that they may continue to act ethically and learn from experience. Such skills are doubly important in complex cases, because decisions are rarely as rational as people imagine”.

This also implies that rhetoric can provide us with analytical tools. A rhetorical analysis aims to track down the selections and deflections that are present in terministic screens and as such creates a “meta-perspective”, or a “perspective on perspectives” (Brummett, 2006; Blakesley, 2002). As Burke argues: “A way of seeing is a way of not seeing, a focus on object *A* involves a neglect of object *B*” (Burke, 1965, p. 49). Burke was convinced that people should study their own and others’ “interpretive statements that explain or rationalize their own actions or the actions of others (…) lest we become victimized by our *trained incapacity*, our inability to interpret signs in any other way but the familiar or comfortable” (Blakesley, 2002, p. 34, emphasis added; also see Rutten and Soetaert, 2013). In our view, this concept of “trained incapacity” refers to the potential blindness of social work students for their own underlying assumptions in their evolving practice. Embracing a rhetorical perspective holds potential to learn to understand the myriad of ways in which the underlying assumptions of social workers will influence the knowledge that is created and the actions that are taken (Fook, 2002). As such, social work students might learn to deal with the ambiguity of situations in which it is hard to say definitely what is going on and what the right response might be.

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