Family support and child protection approaches. Historicising perspectives on contemporary discourses of social work

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of two prevailing and seemingly opposed ideologies in child welfare in Western societies over the last century ('family support' and 'child protection') on social work practice. It scrutinises social work practice in two cases of Dutch-Curaçaoan single-mother families experiencing multiple problems. An ethnographic approach was chosen to study the two families in depth. It shows that, although the cases share many characteristics and circumstances, the social work outcomes diverge. This suggests there is a thin dividing line between support and protection. We argue that the interrelationships between the two base categories and social work practice can be better understood through a historicizing conceptualization of discourses. We suggest that an ethnographic enquiry is suitable for grasping the processual dimensions of social work practice with families as it leads to a more in-depth understanding of, paraphrasing Foucault: the historical interweaving of relations of discourse, of power, of everyday life and of truth.

Keywords

Case study, child protection, comparative, discourse, mothering, social work practice

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Introduction

In the light of two prevailing ideologies of child welfare in Western-European societies over the last century, ‘family support’ and ‘child protection’, this paper aims to capture processual dimensions of social work practice with two Dutch-Curaçaoan single-mother families experiencing ‘multiple problems’: Flores and Julia. The two families were studied as part of a broader ethnographic inquiry into family experiences of social work interventions. The ethnography included 15 Dutch and 15 Dutch-Curaçaoan single-mother families with multiple problems in the Netherlands and was conducted between 2009 and 2012. Triangular methods were used, comprising participant observations, informal interviews, the mothers’ narratives and the analysis of official documents (see Verhallen, 2015).

The paper first describes the different orientations of child welfare policies, and suggests that these can be examined as ‘discourses’ in the Foucauldian sense (Gee, 2015). The question how ‘big discourses’ relate to ‘small discourses’ – accessed through documents, recorded interactions, etc. – is a methodological challenge that must be addressed. In the analytical part of the paper, we develop an ethnographic account of the two cases and ask how it happens that, despite sharing many characteristics and circumstances, the social work outcomes in the two cases diverge. As demonstrated below, there appears to be a thin dividing line between ‘family support’ and ‘child protection’ which in our view can be better understood through a historicizing conceptualization of discourses and be captured by ethnographic enquiry. It must be noted that the paper does not seek to establish whether it was the ‘right’ decision to subject the families to state interventions. Efficacy is also not a central concern of this paper.

Child welfare policies and practices

Child welfare policies and practices are often described in terms of tensions and contradictions regarding the balance between child protection and family support (Featherstone et al., 2014; Gilbert et al., 2011). Briefly, family support can be characterised as services and interventions with poor or struggling families which aim to strengthen the care and capacities of their parents. In child protection, interventions are directed at identifying and protecting children at risk of abuse or neglect. Other terms are used with slightly different connotations. For example, Fox (1982) describes ‘child rescue’ and ‘kinship defenders’. In a later book (Fox, 1997), she distinguishes between ‘state paternalism and child protection’ and ‘the modern defence of the birth family and parents’ rights’. Perhaps, the clearest contrast is posed as ‘child rescue’ versus ‘family preservation’ (Pelton, 1997). A continuum may be considered (Morrison, 2000) of interventions with variable degrees of support and coercion.

The two concepts of family support and child protection have a long history in child welfare across Europe and North America, with different political and ideological foundations, reflecting the care versus control tensions in all welfare

provision (Cooper et al., 2003). They are premised on different versions of what is considered to constitute the rights of families and the role of the State.

This distinction between child protection and family support is used to describe particular forms of intervention or organisational arrangements. A child welfare organisation might have separate child protection or family support teams, or interventions with particular families are seen as responses to 'a child in need' or 'a child at risk' (Morris, 2011). Sometimes the distinction is used to denote the orientation of particular policies or legislation during particular decades (Pelton, 1997), or it is linked to more general family policies in particular countries (Gilbert et al., 2011). A family could receive both interventions, possibly with different agencies, ultimately, however, children either remain with their family or they are placed in substitute care, and the justification for this choice is premised on notions of supporting the family or protecting the child which vary over time and context.

Background

The origin of the two perspectives can be located in the late 1800s/early 1900s in a cross-European climate of social anxiety and moral crusades about the poor. There were concerns about the threat from so-called 'dangerous classes', with increases in migration, industrialization and urbanization, resulting in high levels of unemployment and deprivation in cities. The idealisation of the family meant that a 'protected childhood' provided the cultural backdrop necessary for the acceptance of abuse as a social problem (Nelson, 1987). Children were seen as both victims and threats, but there was a view that something could and should be done. Whilst initially led by philanthropic and voluntary groups, the state began to intervene.

Policies and practices have tended to move between these reactions, sometimes to the extremes but always with elements of both (Baartman, 2011; Pelton, 1997). In general, it is suggested that child protection responses have prevailed over family support (Baartman, 2011; Pelton, 1997).

Gilbert et al. (2011) have noted that since the 1990s, a third orientation has emerged which they call 'child focused'. Such an approach includes aspects of child protection and family support, but displays a stronger concern for 'the child as an individual with an independent relation to the state, and is hence an approach potentially opposed to the family' (2011: 252). They see such an orientation as characterised by early intervention policies, services and practices, with parents' responsibilities as caregivers both examined and supported to ensure they provide 'a good childhood' (2011: 254). If there are concerns about the child, the state intervenes to 'offer support and/or a more authoritarian intervention' (2011: 252), on the basis that the 'family is no longer seen as adequate, on its own, for carrying out the tasks expected of it' (2011: 253). Whilst this third orientation appears to combine elements of family support and child protection, it provides the state with substantial powers to decide the point at which to move between family support and child protection responses.

During the 1970s, the family support model prevailed over the child protection model in the Netherlands. Baartman (2011) and Knijn and Van Nijnatten (2011) argue that particularly since the Savanna case in 2004 orientations shifted toward 'child protection'. Savanna was a 3-year-old girl who was placed out-of-home. When she returned to her family she was molested by her mother and stepfather. The responsible guardian was prosecuted for neglect, with a strong media coverage in the Netherlands.

Also, Ter Meulen et al., (2014) and Regioplan (2015) argue that 'child protection' is currently the dominant view in the Netherlands. The 'permanency planning approach' counts in their view as an example of this dominant orientation, meaning that because continuity and permanency regarding child rearing are culturally valued as crucial, adoption is prioritised over institutional care. Although the word 'adoption' has hardly been used, Dutch policy has been shifting towards 'matching children to foster parents for the long-term' (Ter Meulen et al., 2014).

Not only Baartman's proposal to combine 'care and supervision with an eye to safety' (2011: 10) is predated by Fox Harding's (1997) attempts to reconcile the differences between the two perspectives, also the adoption of state-supervised children by foster parents can be regarded as a third orientation. However, placement in a foster family arguably brings practice closer to child protection, as the child is separated from the birth family, even though in the longer term the situation changes to support of the 'new' family.

Child protection and family support as 'discourses'

The distinction between child protection and family support has been central to child welfare, with different policy configurations being described, values are outlined and interventions to individual families are organised and justified. However, by examining child protection and family support as 'discourses' one moves away from an essentialist approach to an analysis of the values, ambitions, actions and formulations of policymakers or practitioners. A discursive approach is concerned with how actors' claims about truth, knowledge and action are determined by what is 'sayable' about a particular social reality in a given socio-historical context. The question then becomes how certain versions of the family, the nature of appropriate family relationships and the position of family in relation to the state, are both enabled and constrained by larger socio-historically situated discourses of child welfare.

Linking 'big' with 'small' discourses

For Foucault (1979), the concept of discourse brings out 'what is speakable as true' at a particular point in time and place. Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) concentrates on historical tracings and the socially productive aspects of such 'sayables'. According to Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008), this

entails three dimensions of analysis of discursive practices: (i) a historical enquiry into conditions of possibility, (ii) attention to mechanisms of power, including a description of their functioning and (iii) subjectification – the signifying practices in which subjects are made up. FDA cannot be delimited to a set of formal principles. It is better served by setting up methodological signposts for the corpus collection of discourse samples, with preferred status being assigned to ‘problematisations’ (examples where discursive objects are made ‘problematic’ and therefore visible and knowable), ‘technologies’ (practical forms of rationality for the government of self and others), ‘subject positions’ (e.g. the positions on which to ground claims about truth and responsibility) and ‘subjectifications’ (e.g. attention to questions such as how subjects transform and fashion themselves within a moral order).

While Fairclough (1992) and Heritage (1997) have sought to connect the aspirations of FDA with more linguistic, ethnomethodological and conversation analytic traditions in discourse analysis, the implications of the Foucauldian ‘toolkit’ for ethnographic enquiry have been much debated. Some caution against foregone ideological conclusions and determinism, while others have explored potential for complementarity, e.g. Miller (1997), Hill (2009).

Gee (2015: 67) invites attention to how situated language use, i.e. ‘small-d’ discourse – in the analysis of documents and recorded interactional sequences, connects with the ‘big-D’ Discourses envisaged by FDA. This way he views the micro-dynamics of interactive communication through ‘the lens of the socially meaningful identities’ associated with the discourses which are enacted. Micro-interactional behaviour then counts as a continuation of ‘a long-running conversation between such identities’, in the sense that discourses are being enacted while they temporarily remain in the hands of interactants in the here-and-now. This comes with affordances and constraints, but does not leave the speakers in a position of being ‘dupes of the big-D discourses’.

Similarly, Wetherell (1998) highlights the relevance of so-called ‘interpretative repertoires’, which underpin speakers’ expressions of local meaning in the conversational dynamics at a particular moment of speaking. Interpretative repertoires are ‘back-cloths for the realization of locally-managed positions in actual interactions’ (1998: 400–401). Wetherell (1998: 403) continues that ‘a good ethnography of communication demonstrates [that] it is not necessary to say everything about the argumentative fabric of a society to say something, and something furthermore which is scholarly, complete and insightful concerning participant orientations’, and which takes those orientations as constructed by more than what we demonstrated below. The two cases we analyse raise the question how, despite striking similarities in background, personal history and institutional trajectory, the institutional intervention developed in quasi-opposite directions. This raises questions about how the ‘big D’-opposition between ‘child protection’ and ‘family support’ relates to the contingencies in the dynamics of interlocking speech events in the context of ‘similar’ cases (Kendall and Wickham, 1999).

Methods

The two cases of Flores and Julia (two Dutch-Curaçaoan single mothers)¹ are drawn from a 30-month qualitative study conducted over a period of 3 years in the Netherlands (see Verhallen, 2015). An ethnographic research design was chosen to capture how family support and child protection measures were carried out with 30 Dutch and Dutch-Curaçaoan single-mother families. A triangular approach was used to gather data. Verhallen mainly relied on participant observations, documentation and informal interviews. In addition, more theory-driven discourse analysis was used (cf. Hall and Slembrouck, 2009) to examine the fine-grained detail of social work of textual instances and sequences of talk ('small discourse' in Gee's sense above). Here, we will focus on the broader processual understanding of the interrelated 'speech events' with an aim to understand the role of 'big discourses' on the basis of a resultant ethnographic account.

Since enquiries into family support and child protection interventions are delicate research endeavours, Verhallen accessed the interventions via the families. In doing so, the establishment of ethnographic rapport and a trusting relationship with the families was prioritised. The families of Flores and Julia consented to participate, as did the social workers involved. Levels of mutual personal convenience determined the frequency of visits – on average several hours a few times per month and observations of the social work encounters were informant initiated. In the case of Flores, this was more than 20 times and in the case of Julia more than 10 times. Ethical approval was in line with the guidelines set by Utrecht University.² It was helpful to the study that the mothers participated on a voluntary basis and were approached via professionals who have access to families such as doctors and lawyers. The mothers could withdraw from the study at any time and this facilitated the research relationship. Verhallen also went to Curaçao for 2 months to gain an insight into the cultural and linguistic background of the Dutch-Curaçaoan mothers. This was needed for a contextual understanding of their narratives and contributed positively to overcoming 'psychological distance' (Wolcott, 1996).

Between 2010 and 2012, Verhallen visited Flores more than 70 and Julia more than 20 times in accordance to their convenience. She observed, participated in, their daily lives with the aim to ethnographically understand the way the mothers interpret and construct their life experiences. Participation was reaffirmed with every visit. On average, the visits took 3 hours. Verhallen also met with Flores' and Julia's network (i.e. their family, friends, social workers, family supervisors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, judges). She talked with them about the families' circumstances and the things that went well and didn't go well. They were informed about the study and agreed to participate. Over time, everyone seemed to have become accustomed to the researcher's presence. Additional data included letters from various institutions, copies of the child protection case file, diaries, test results and pictures.

Verhallen accompanied Flores to supervised meetings to see her daughter Felicia (4), to her brother Luigi where her son Fabian (16) resides, to consultations with her lawyer, office meetings with social workers and the juvenile court. In the

case of Julia, she accompanied the mother to family meetings, parties and school. Julia has three sons living with her (Kenley, 11; Luigi, 8 and Achetely, 7) and a daughter Lilly (6), who mainly lived with Julia's mother Cynthia. The ethnographic accounts developed below draw substantially on the narratives that developed in the course of the ethnographic enquiry (see Verhallen, 2015).

Findings

Both mothers live in the same large city in the Netherlands. They don't know each other. Both were raised in a poor Curaçaoan neighbourhood where they went to primary and secondary school. Julia migrated from Curaçao to the Netherlands in 1991 and Flores in 2002. Curaçao is a former Dutch colony; since 2010, it is an independent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Because of their Dutch nationality, they were ineligible for an integration trajectory, but attendance of courses for newcomers was at their own expense. Neither had financial resources to pay for these courses (first interview with Flores; first interview with Julia, 2010). Julia and Flores acknowledged that the expectations they had of the Netherlands 'did not fit reality' (idem Flores, 2010); 'the Netherlands wasn't the paradise they had been told about in Curaçao' (idem Julia, 2010). So, a 'culture clash' (idem Flores, 2010), little knowledge of Dutch society (idem Flores; Julia, 2010) and scarce financial resources (idem Flores; Julia, 2010) placed them in a disadvantaged position from the day that they had arrived.

Flores

Flores had 14 sisters and brothers and was the youngest of the family. She was, as she herself states 'not very welcome in the family'. Her parents got divorced. Flores' relationship with her mother was difficult. Consequently, Flores lived most of her childhood with her father. She became pregnant at 17 and her mother insisted on an abortion but Flores refused and gave birth to her son Fabian. Then, Flores' mother and brother Luigi decided that it would be better for Flores and Fabian that Luigi would take care for Fabian. Luigi had a job and income and was seen as more prosperous than Flores. When Luigi decided to migrate to the Netherlands, Fabian came with him and Luigi became Fabian's legal guardian.

A few years later, Flores decided to immigrate to the Netherlands because she missed Fabian. Initially, she stayed with Luigi and Fabian, but the house was too small and she didn't feel welcome. Flores moved elsewhere, but couldn't pay the rent, and her situation worsened: she did not speak Dutch very well, had no real network or any friends, incurred debts and became ill, lonely and depressive. Due to the fact that she lacked a stable residency and job (her occupation was taking care for elderly people) she took up informal work as a cleaner and got involved in criminal activities (fare dodging, shoplifting and drug trafficking). The Dutch police caught her for drug trafficking – she had been recruited as a body packer to transport drugs, and she was sentenced to a few months in prison. With the help

of probation service, she managed to find a job and build a life. She got a boyfriend. However, due to health and financial problems – she was not able to work fulltime whilst she couldn't afford the costly medicine – her work contract ended.

In 2006, Flores voluntarily went to social services for help in applying for unemployment benefit, finding suitable housing, taking Dutch-language lessons and finding a job. Flores asked for assistance from a social worker because she had certain needs and experienced difficulties with filling out the forms. Flores received the requested administrative support (also her case file shows this). After a while, according to Flores, the social worker started to patronise her as 'she meddled with me more and more'.

Then, Flores became pregnant. After a year, her boyfriend left her. Flores raised her daughter Felicia on her own, but experienced difficulties largely related to her job. How could she combine her job with taking care of Felicia, then 2 years old? Flores asked for child-rearing assistance, but did not receive any help. One day in the morning after breakfast, Flores and her administrative social worker brought Felicia to the child day-care centre before Flores would go to work. As a reaction to a conflict that arose between Flores and the social worker, Flores dismissed the social worker. According to Flores and an official report (reports in case file, 2008–2012) 'the conflict was about Felicia's breakfast' (not a proper breakfast in the view of the social worker). According to another official report (report in case file, 2008), the conflict was about the purchase of a scanner, although it doesn't state what had happened. Another official document entitled 'emergency out-of-home placement' (2008) states 'that the scanner-purchase led to Felicia's placement in care'. So, purchasing a scanner was probably seen as 'neglect' in the light of Flores' dire financial situation, which might have led to a conflict with Flores.

Later that day when Flores went to the child day-care centre to pick up Felicia, it turned out that a representative of a Child Protection Agency had picked up Felicia. Felicia was placed in care with urgency (report in case file, 2008).

The 'neglect' of Felicia is repeated a number of times in later documents (various reports, 2008–2012) as 'Flores cannot take care for Felicia due to her limited intellectual capability' and 'she lacks insight into her situation' (quotes). In Flores' view, it was the breakfast incident with the social worker, which caused her problems with the Child Protection Agency. The motive for Felicia's placement in care continued to be a disputed topic in 2010 between Flores and the third family supervisor named Hester (participant observation of encounters, 2010). Eighteen months after being removed into care, Felicia, then aged four, 'displays problematic behaviour' (Hester in encounter, 2010). According to Hester, 'Felicia has a severe development disorder and ADHD' (Hester in encounters, 2010–2011).

Flores also received voluntary assistance from Tamara (a professional) (participant observation of encounters, 2010–2011). In general, Tamara was more positive about Flores than Hester (idem). Tamara found that Hester should take into account Flores' situation and feelings more than she currently did and often disagreed with Hester's decisions and choices (participant observation of encounters, 2010–2011). In contrast to Hester, Tamara advised Flores 'never to consent to a

discharge order' and 'never to sign any contract' (quotes of Tamara, 2010). It was striking that both Flores and Tamara would criticise Hester in her absence (participant observation, 2011).

Flores was critical of both Hester (who, in Flores' view, 'lied') and Tamara (who 'did not do her work properly' (interviews with Flores, 2011) but she was reluctant in explicitly criticising them, as she felt insecure and powerless and afraid that such criticism might worsen her own situation.

In 2011, Verhallen was present when Hester communicated to Flores that 'I want to apply for a full custody order' (participant observation, 2011), but since Flores did not consent to relinquishing her custody (idem), Hester applied for a (non-consensual) order in court (report, 2011). Another representative of the Child Protection Agency (who never saw Flores before) argued that 'the mother is too irresponsible and incapable to raise her child . . . Felicia has overtaken Flores' intelligence. It would be really necessary for Felicia that legal parental authority be given to the Agency' (field notes taken in juvenile court, 2011).

In 2012, the juvenile judge decided to discharge Flores from her parental authority by stating that 'it is not contrary to the child's interest to discharge the mother from her legal parental authority' (decision in writing, 2012). This meant that Felicia was placed under the full legal authority and responsibility of a family supervisor from a Child Protection Agency, and that this is to continue until she reaches adulthood (idem).

Julia

Julia is the eldest of three sisters and one brother and was raised in an extended family. She was 10 years old when her parents divorced. Julia was treated 'as a little princess by both her parents and had a good relationship with them, especially with my mother Cynthia' (first informal interview, 2010). Julia did not finish secondary school and worked in a hotel. When Cynthia decided to migrate to the Netherlands, she took both Julia and Julia's brother (the second eldest child) with her. After a while, Cynthia returned to Curaçao, because she couldn't cope with the cold climate and Julia's grandmother took care of Julia in the Netherlands. According to Julia, this is when 'hell' started: Julia had to clean the house and was forced to quit her education because she had to work to pay the bills. Between her 15th and 19th birthday, Julia rebelled and got involved with 'bad friends' (third informal interview, 2010). According to Julia, her financial problems started when her grandmother applied for various allowances and benefits for which Julia turned out to be ineligible because she had employment.

At that point, Julia had to repay taxes, but she couldn't. Her debts increased; she lost her home, was homeless and ended up in the city where she now lives. The police charged her a few times for shoplifting, drug dealing and other things, but Julia was never sent to prison. Julia cheated many people and was cheated on herself many times. Hence, Julia didn't trust her 'friends' anymore while realising that she couldn't solve her own situation.

At the age of 19, Julia took the initiative to sign up for a youth trajectory in order to better her life. She took classes to become an electrician and got a boyfriend. She didn't finish the programme, because 'I couldn't cope with the problematic circumstances which had developed' (third informal interview, 2010). That is, she was pregnant of Kenley, but before he was born, his father died in a car accident. Julia was devastated. She lived here and there, and had irregular working hours as a cook.

After a while, when Kenley was almost 3 years old, Julia met a man who treated her well and she decided to move in with him. They were happy for years and together they had two sons and a daughter. But then, in Julia's account, he lost his job when the children were aged between 0 and 5 and the problems started. He spent his unemployment benefit on drink and marihuana and became aggressive towards Julia and attacked her. She left him taking all the children with her (third informal interview, 2010).

Julia was back on the streets, now with her children. She called Cynthia for help. Although living in Curaçao, she arranged that Julia would get assistance. Via a lawyer, Julia got help from a social worker who urgently arranged housing and basic needs for Julia's family. Then, other social workers took over which was problematic, as in Julia's view 'nothing changed, and things only became worse' (second informal interview, 2010). Julia didn't get the assistance she needed and that is why her problems increased. Julia couldn't do intensive physical work, because she had serious health problems. Although the social services had been informed about this, Julia was recurrently asked to clean streets and parks in return for unemployment benefit. Julia refused these calls and frequently had to prove that she couldn't do the job, whilst facing problems securing arrear payments (several informal interviews, 2010–2011). During this period, Julia was still in close contact with Cynthia. Cynthia was planning to return to the Netherlands to assist Julia's family if she would find a job.

From 2009 on, Julia received help from a child welfare social worker and Cynthia. Julia voluntarily asked for help, because her eldest son Kenley displayed serious behavioural problems which affected other children (Julia's case file). But when Julia read in an official report of the child welfare social worker that 'a schoolteacher confirms that Julia smoked marihuana in the schoolyard' (official report in 2010), Julia's confidence in the social worker was compromised, as she was depicted as an 'incompetent mother' (official report, 2010). Later when she objected to the social worker's advice to send Kenley on his own to school, she was seen as 'uncooperative' in another official report (2010). In a referral of 2010, which was intended for the Child Protection Board to assess Julia's family situation and to inform the juvenile judge if a supervision order would be imposed, Julia was defined as 'not being sufficiently capable of handling her complex situation' and furthermore framed as being 'at risk of possibly neglecting her children [...] by virtue of her limited cognitive abilities'.

Consequently, Julia's family became subject to the child protection system and the Child Protection Board would inspect the matter. The juvenile judge decided on a supervision order for a period of 6 months (decision in writing, 2010). In the light

of Julia's pregnancy with a fifth child, the supervision order was extended for another 6 months (decision in writing, 2011).

Cynthia went to the school in 2011 to ask who had spoken to the child social worker. Since it turned out that nobody had done so, Cynthia insisted on getting a signed letter from the school and went with this letter to both the agency employing the social worker and the Child Protection Agency involved in order to rectify the statements about Julia. The diagnosis of 'uncooperative' attributed to Julia by the child social worker in 2010 was changed in 2011 to 'promising' by the then family supervisor, named Kamilla as a result of Cynthia's lobbying, the trust Kamilla gained in Julia and Cynthia and the good working relationship they had built together.

As part of the child protection investigation, both Julia and Kenley were asked to take an IQ test and scored below average (80–85) (results of test, 2011). Hence, in 2011, a social worker, named Simone (a professional) introduced herself to Julia's family. Kamilla enlisted the support of Simone's organization to address the (potential) needs of Julia and Kenley and arranged family group conferences for Julia. In Kamilla's view, Julia was able to care for her children with the help of these conferences in which Cynthia would play a key role. She advised the juvenile judge not to renew the supervision order for another year. The judge concurred, because Julia and Kamilla were partners in setting future goals (Judicial Decision, 2012).

Analysis

Although Flores' situation was in general similar to Julia's, we have seen that their family support and child protection interventions developed in opposite directions. It is striking that both families entered the child protection system after a conflict with a social worker who was assisting on a voluntary basis. Flores' administrative social worker called the Advies- en Meldpunt Kindermishandeling (AMK) (Child Abuse Counselling and Reporting Center) for an emergency order placement-in-care which placed Felicia in institutional care. The social worker of Kenley had applied for a supervision order on the basis of a risk of child neglect. Their case files reveal that both cases were initially framed as 'child neglect'. These institutional labels differ from the mothers' own perceptions, who never saw themselves as a 'neglecting' parent.

An analysis of various institutional texts (documents, official reports, test results, judicial decisions) and encounters show that both Flores and Julia were categorised as 'incapable', as having a 'low IQ', as 'warm' and 'loving' but 'uncooperative', yet at other points as 'capable' and 'cooperative'. Notwithstanding this, a major difference seems to lie in the framing of Flores as 'a mother whose intelligence has been overtaken by her daughter' (family supervisor in court, 2011) and Julia as 'promising' (official report, 2011). These opposed institutional frames for Flores and Julia appear to have played an important role in the divergent outcomes of the cases.

In order to better understand these outcomes, it must be noted that the family supervisors of Flores and Julia used the same Delta method (Netherlands Youth

Institute, 2010) as a tool to assess the threat to the child's development (participant observation and informal interviews, 2010). Delta is a method to formulate goals in collaboration with the family in four steps: (1) formulating concerns, strengths and the family's perspective; (2) identifying potential disturbances in, and threats to, the child's development; (3) formulating favourable outcomes and (4) formulating goals, action points 'with a plan on the table'.

While in the views of both Hester and Kamilla (informal interviews, 2010) their pedagogical outlook was based on values of 'protection', 'safety', 'continuity', 'permanency' and 'the child's best interest', these values resulted in a different dynamics in practice: Hester mainly seemed to focus on Flores' and Felicia's problems and risks, and Kamilla on Julia and her family's strengths. The different perceptions regarding their skills and capacities, the assessment of the risks to the child's development and their interactions with the family, among other things, resulted in the formulation of different goals and set in motion different intervention scenarios, as demonstrated by the outcomes of the intervention.

It must be noted that the family supervisors do not hold enough power to make these decisions alone. They work for a manager and decision-making is influenced by the directives, endorsement and challenges of the wider organisation, the government and other agencies (e.g. the court). Although we don't have access to the institutional behind-the-scenes discussions, the study of the case files, the informal interviews and the observations of the researcher suggest that certain features appear to have had a decisive influence on the orientation of the case.

Important reasons for why Flores' family got enmeshed in the child protection system ending with an abrogation of parental authority seem to lie, first, in the initial gravity of the supervision order and Flores' discord with the description of what 'really' happened at the time of Felicia's urgent placement in care. It has been noted that once a label is attached to a case, the formulation – often captured in a short narrative – is hard to change (Hall, 1997; Hennum, 2011). The opposed views of Flores and Hester regarding the initial cause led to an accumulation of conflicts between them and to the framing of Flores as 'irresponsible', 'incapable' and 'uncooperative'. Moreover, these labels affected Flores' self-perception and resulted in a negative description of herself in interactions with Hester, for instance, by echoing institutional categorisations.

During a home visit in November 2011, Hester says:

Hence [referring to: the aforementioned developmental disorder] the results show, and therefore we also say, you can't care for Felicia. [...] Every time when I visit you we can discuss this issue about whether Felicia can or can't live with you, and why she won't.

A few minutes later Flores says:

Psychologists tested Felicia's and my IQ, and the results show that I can never care for Felicia. But, I have taken care of Felicia for almost 2 years.

Hester: That's true

Flores: And you also tell me that I can't care for Felicia, and that Felicia is going to stay with these old [around 55 years of age] Dutch people. [...] I want my family to take care of Felicia. [...] My family is not the same as me. I have, uh, uh, a low IQ.

In instances like the above (see Verhallen, 2015), we see that Flores uses the same language as the family supervisor by saying: 'and the results show that I [as opposed to: you] can never care for Felicia'. By reproducing her own diagnosis, she represents herself as if she 'can never care for Felicia' and as being 'incapable' by saying that 'my family is not the same as me. I have, uh, uh, a low IQ'.

The consequence of this kind of self-labeling seems to lead towards heavier intervention measures. Also Flores' lack in capacity in adequately defending herself, as she missed a social network or somebody who advocated on her behalf, appears to have been crucial. Additionally, Hester's orientation towards placing Felicia in a permanent new home (foster care) instead of working towards family support (e.g. supervised housing) appears to have been fundamental in applying for a full custody order. A lack of support in general, and Flores' situation of (probably) losing her parental authority made her less confident about her capabilities as a 'good' mother than Julia.

Paradoxically, in spite of placing the safety of the child to the fore, as Hester did, Felicia's safety/protection may have been jeopardised in practice because of the recurrent disputes between Hester and Flores about the initial reasons for an urgent placement of the child in care. As disagreements dominated the conversations between Flores and Hester, the talk was rarely about what Felicia felt or believed. Following Lonne et al. (2009) and Baartman (2011), it could be argued that child protection discourse does not intrinsically orientate towards 'the best interest of the child', as the voice of the child may become secondary in cases when the mother and family supervisor are in dispute. In the case of Julia and Kamilla, the child appeared to be much more at the forefront of the talk between family supervisor and mother.

A difference between Kamilla's and Hester's orientation is that Kamilla seemed to be oriented towards a family support approach because she encouraged Julia and openly discussed the problems and strengths of Julia's family, while Hester didn't seem to confirm Flores in her strengths. As opposed to Hester, Kamilla was able to make the working relationship successful and facilitated change within Julia's family.

Julia's mother Cynthia seems to have played a key role in steering the family away from heavier supervision orders as she advocated on behalf of Julia and went to great lengths to clear Julia's name. Julia has a good relationship with her relatives and especially her mother played a positive role during various stages of contact with social welfare and child protection agencies. A supportive approach and reliance on a social network appears to direct the interventions.

Discussion

In order to better understand how child protection interventions develop the way they do, detailed analysis of interactional sequences in which categorisation are at the forefront may be used to reveal where and how encounters become indicative of approaches of child rescue versus family support (Hall et al., 2006). The addition of global ethnographic accounts, synthesizing narratives, which span a longer period of time and build on a 'retelling' of a number of earlier 'tellings', encourage researchers to develop a more gradual, processual and multi-sited perspective, which is sensitive to how encounters, documents, procedures and their outcomes feed into each other. One of the risks indeed with the analysis of isolated sequences of interactional data is that too much weight may be attributed to an occasioned encounter and a single sequence of interaction as the privileged loci for explaining the direction taken by a particular case. The problem is not that such 'privileged' moments do not exist, but rather that pivotal momentary decisiveness cannot by default be presumed to apply.

Appropriate units of analysis may well, and often do, extend beyond discrete events, inviting detailed attention to the specific linkages across encounters and throughout a procedure (Agha and Wortham, 2005). Categorisation outcomes build gradually, in addition to happening pivotally during single encounters (as indeed they may). Wortham (2005) in particular advocates a more accumulative approach in contexts where an individual's public identity is established over a chain of encounters in which individuals are treated as incumbent of a particular identity. Flores' and Julia's accounts above suggest instances of both decisive moments and aggregate factors leading to particular outcomes (aggregate factors may include the number of different social workers on the case, the strength of a client's social network and the positions of advocacy enabled by it, etc.).

A second, related question is how such ethnographic accounts can be instrumental in developing a Foucauldian-inspired analysis of the larger 'big D'-discourses that, looked at through more of a macro lens, enable us to insert the case into larger conditioned 'sayables' about child welfare, and from a more agentive perspective, what may direct a specific case in a particular direction. Julia's case with its exit from the child protection system is fairly unique in the larger data set of seventeen cases and at this point in time it is only in Flores' case that full parental authority went to the Child Protection Agency.

It would seem that the system, in its current dynamics in the Netherlands, is more oriented towards control and management risk, and more often than not (in this study in fourteen cases), this results in placement outside the family (cf. Clarijs, 2013; Regioplan, 2015 for the increased numbers of placements in care). In our article, we have concentrated on the two extremes within the corpus of 17 cases. The interest of the child, being assigned central status and being placed in opposition to the parental interest, prevails, and this is a departure from 1970s model which was founded on a joint interest of parents and children. While drawing

attention to larger scale policy shifts, we argue that elements of contingency are equally important: e.g. whether an irreversible point has been reached in a procedure, the client's self-perceptions and how these (fail to) align with observations in reports, the supervisor's stake vis-à-vis the categorisations that are on the table (e.g. was the category acted upon inherited from previous workers, or did it originate within the current mandate?), etc.

The role of such contingencies pushes one away from a position where explanations remain limited to client and case characteristics, focusing instead on specific dynamics which play out in the flow of ongoing events.

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Notes

1. All names are fictitious for confidentiality reasons. Some details have been changed in the interest of preserving anonymity.
2. Elsewhere Verhallen (2016) reflected thoroughly on her own subjective role and ethical conundrums.

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