

**THE DISCOURSE OF EMPOWERMENT:
A DIALOGICAL SELF THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE
INTERFACE OF PERSON AND INSTITUTION IN SOCIAL SERVICE
SETTINGS**

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ABSTRACT. The use of 'I' and 'we' was analysed in a single case study of a conversation between a child welfare professional and a client. Such conversations are ambiguous situations because although child care workers assume a caring attitude, at the same time they have to operate within a coercive frame. This study shows that child-care workers play a sophisticated game, alternately adopting dialogical positions that are either contiguous or different from that of the client. The argument proposed is that both in external and in internal dialogues, common ground must be reached before change resulting from conflicting I-positions can occur. For that reason, beside I-positions, we-positions play a crucial role in achieving the desired changes that in child welfare interventions. Both professional and client use these presentations to strengthen their communicative position. The same presentations may come about in the interactions between community psychologist and communities, when communities may change their positions in response to professional interventions, making explicit the tension between commonalities and differences. The challenge for agents of change is to look for common ground with clients in order to restore disturbed relations between groups or individuals and society.

Ever since the end of the 19th century, institutions in the field of education, health and welfare have assumed a growing role in the tuning of societal norms concerning citizenship and the individual practices of citizens. Child welfare is a social institution that aims to adjust troubled behaviour to societal norms.

According to Jacques Donzelot (1979), so called 'psy-professionals' (Ingleby, 1985) played a crucial role in the rise of a social domain ('le social') between the private and the public. Until the 20th century, public interference in the private life of citizens was the prerogative of churches and civil foundations of the wealthy bourgeoisie. Governmental initiatives to support and preserve social and cultural order were limited to penal legislation. In West European countries, as increasingly more private initiatives were undertaken and new social laws on (child) labour and social security came into effect, a complex of interventions based on private and state enterprise developed.

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Most welfare is state-subsidized and based on the rule of law, and citizens can insure themselves against the cost of certain forms of assistance. Professional interventions range from introducing new ways of relating to others to coercive programmes aimed at combating certain types of behaviour. The field of these interventions is created by conflicts between individual moralities and societal norms regarding hygiene, sexuality, childrearing, etc. With its special link to juvenile and family courts, child welfare is part of a psycho-judicial complex of legal measures and supportive practices, a complex comprising a range of measures, subtle mixes of repression and voluntary adaptation directed at the family. Parents are not always opposed to the involvement of child welfare, and may sometimes themselves ask to be relieved of their responsibilities.

Toward the end of the 20th century, moralistic family interventions were replaced by more subtle psychological techniques (Van Nijnatten, 1988). Child welfare policy today aims at leaving plenty of room for cultural specificity, for people's own choices, and for negotiating new behavioural patterns and compromises that are acceptable both to citizens and society; but, it is also an effort to re-establish a sense of belonging to the community of adults that takes responsibility for future generations. The psycho-judicial complex embraces a range of settings to support the integration of diverse groups and communities, to stimulate their participation. At a general level, the intention is also to see that citizens are at work and that men and women, groups with different ethnic backgrounds, age, sexual preference, etc. are distributed equally throughout the workforce (Bond, 1999). More specifically, particular social groups are identified as being at risk and therefore in need of preventive action: single teenager mothers, young unemployed couples of minority groups, and drug-addicted parents are offered special child-rearing courses. The question of whether these educational programmes should be merely urged or enforced is an issue of permanent debate (Junger-Tas, 1997). In the last resort, when preventive community programmes are unsuccessful, child welfare provides an individually based curative approach to families in trouble.

The psychological and juridical origin of child welfare intervention is evident in family supervision orders. In this study, the conversation between a child welfare agent and a divorced mother is analysed in the context of such an order. Coercive interventions in single parent families with problematic access arrangements are far from exceptional. Family supervisors are appointed by the family court to control the conditions of upbringing of a minor and to take further (legal) measures to guarantee minimal conditions for the child to develop. At the same time, the supervision order, being temporary, is meant to support changes and persuade clients voluntarily to reconstruct their perspectives in line with generally accepted social norms of how to raise children. This ambiguous relation between care and control may lead to

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misunderstandings (Van Nijnatten, 2005). The aim of child welfare interventions is to change, by negotiation rather than by coercion, familial positions that are problematic from the point of view of public order. A child care worker might say: 'you, as a parent, don't function according to how *we* think that parents should behave in *our* society. The conduct in *your* family is not just a *private* affair, but *we* expect *you* to behave as *all* (normal) parents do'. The idea of child welfare workers is that confrontation between professional and client only serves to delay the helping and adaptive process (Van Nijnatten, 2005). Parents and children are therefore invited to cooperate rather than being forced to change conditions in the family. In spite of the relation to the family court, the family supervisor order resembles the therapeutic situation as 'a linguistic event in which people are engaged in a collaborative relationship and conversation – a mutual endeavour toward possibility' (Anderson, 1997, 2). The relation between child welfare and family is transactional rather than unilateral: that is, cultural norms regarding parenthood and child development are negotiated rather than imposed on families and their lives, and cultural norms about how to raise children also change as a result of transformations in family life. The underlying idea is that changes in family life will be more reliable if clients themselves have contributed to the solutions. This is consistent with Rappaport's (1987) view on empowerment in which community psychologists together with community members look for local solutions rather than standard procedures that take their origin from dominant values about race, class and gender. Child welfare workers empowering individual clients radiate a view on communities as groups of active and social responsible citizens achieving individual autonomy through cooperation. Treating citizens as collaborating agents is considered to be the key to successful community programs. Yet in the end child welfare will intervene coercively if the family does not live up to society's norms of child rearing.

The core of an ecological approach to communities and individual citizens is negotiation over cultural norms. Because these norms are diverse and are close to the lives lived in different socio-cultural communities, empowerment is only possible when professionals manage to develop collaborative relationships with members of the different communities and learn about their specific local resources (Trickett, 2002). There is an underlying optimistic assumption that (groups of) people can change their positions in response to the changed context of an intervention and that social exclusion therefore may be prevented. The theory of the Dialogical Self may help us to understand how change in relationships and in persons may come about, especially the positions of child welfare clients in families at risk.

Dialogical self theory contributions

Dialogue is conceptualized as both an interpersonal and intrapersonal process. A dynamic organization of shifting I-positions makes a flexibly operating subject possible (Valsiner, 2002). This auto-regulatory capacity facilitates openness to new experiences whilst at the same time (temporarily) maintaining stability in other parts of the self system. The dialogical self develops through links between I-positions, but the meta-regulatory framework limits the field of possible I-positions (Valsiner, 2002, p. 263).

Following Bakhtin, Hermans (1999a) says that the independent position of the uniquely located other creates room for the subject to make innovations in the self. At the same time, relations with other people create a context in which the person gives up his or her individual position and assumes a position as a member of a group. There is an ongoing process of contradiction, tuning and integration of I-positions and we-positions (or 'they' or 'them') (cf. Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1996). There is both continuity, in the experience of familiar people as belonging to our own realm (we-positions), and discontinuity, as these people speak differently.

According to Hermans (1999b), change is most likely to occur in situations where there is conflict at the intrapersonal or interpersonal level. These experienced conflicts may lead to suffering and the search for professional help, but not necessarily lead to change (Dimaggio, Fiore, Lysaker et al., 2006). If people do not experience distress or conflict between I-positions while other people consider some of them problematic, interpersonal disagreement may help lead to change. Child welfare interventions become intelligible from this point of view. The coercive character of these interventions may inhibit clients to express mixed feelings about the upbringing of their children, all the more being aware that there will be conflicting views on how to raise children. Realising that if parts of the self-system are at odds, agreement with another person is an important condition for change, child welfare workers will start to look for agreements with the client in order to advance change. As the differences will be concentrated on parenting qualities, I expect the professionals to emphasize commonalities between the client's and the professional's intentions, in particular with respect to the child's best interests.

The empirical study

The case presented here is a family supervision order. The aim of this order is to repair the parent-child relation and to secure the child's mental and physical interests. The family supervision order is temporary and the explicit goal is that the parents should retake full responsibility for the upbringing of their children as soon as possible. That is why the family supervisors' approach is focused both on mutuality and a jointly endorsed view of the family problems (Hofstede; Van Nijnatten & Suurmond, 2001). In the case presented here, I expect to find conflict and discrepancy between the

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institutional norms concerning child-rearing articulated by child-care workers and the individual norms expressed by parents. Confronting troubled families with community norms about parenting takes place in dialogues about concrete practices. Within the frame of enforced assimilation, I expect family supervisors to seek common ground and inter-agreement to optimize the chances of intra-disagreements leading to changes in the best interests of the children involved. It is therefore relevant to see how, in the conversation of our case, processes of change are achieved. I am especially interested in the way professionals and clients refer to general norms and particular positions, in order to construct or deconstruct classifications of problematic parenthood and community deviance (Hall, Slembrouck & Sarangi, 2006). I will look for evidence that parents are aware of the impact of the intervention, reacting defensively by asserting the position that no change is needed, and how family supervisors react to that.

Method

This is a single case study. Such an analysis is legitimate because the contextual and qualitative approach to the data preserves the qualitative, systemic and dynamic character through the analytical process (Crawford & Valsiner, 1999). The analytic procedures are based on the methods of qualitative conversation and discourse analysis of professional-client interactions (McLeod & Balamoutsou, 2000).

Integrating constructionist approaches and conversation analysis is a good way to study changes resulting from dialogical child welfare interventions (Abell & Stokoe, 2001). Constructionists emphasize the development of self-identity through representations of self and others. Narrative psychologists stress that by telling, people create and enact their identity. Yet 'the constructionist approach fails a fine-grained empirical analysis of discourse', which is needed to understand how people build their identities by adopting positions in conversations and beginning to act according to these positions (Davies & Harré, 1990). Conversation analysis does provide such a precise empirical instrument to study the actual interactions through which I-positions and we-positions are taken. However, this approach is also problematic as it often only takes into account what is said and done in the conversation and ignores cultural and contextual resources. The process of identity-formation is not limited to the immediate context of everyday interactions; people not only present themselves before their interlocutors but also call on and demonstrate cultural values according to the particular community, gender or race they belong to. In such interactions - negotiating, questioning and confronting - they refer to cultural norms and positions that people take beyond the actual dialogue (Abell & Stokoe, 2001). In the conversation with the family supervisor, several identities are available to the parent: former wife, coloured single mother, lower class client, etc. These identities are no mere empty categories, but rather cultural ideas about what a wife, a mother or a client is and should be, and how these ideas are related to identities of gender, race and class.

The interaction occurring in two encounters between a family supervisor and a white lower class mother are analyzed below. The meetings were video-recorded in the living room of mother's house. The conversations lasted 1:20:17 and 59.50 respectively. The case was selected from a corpus of 40 video-taped interactions between family supervisors and parents and belonged to the subcategory of 'complete' cases in which all conversations were successful video-recorded until the moment that the family supervisor had formulated a written care plan. The case under study is exceptional as it was the only one in which a dialogical reorganization was observable so soon, the client showing a clear change of position at the end of the second conversation. Yet this does not exclude that in other cases, similar changes of position may have occurred. These changes took longer to achieve, and so were not observable in this study within the time that the care plan had been written.

Mother is 31 years old; she has a seven years-old son and a six years-old daughter. Mother and father divorced three years ago. Both children IN this family have fallen behind at school, due to the effects of parental discord. Mother and father are in conflict over father's visiting arrangements. As a consequence, the children have been examined by a mental health agency (Riagg). During the first encounter, the family supervisor discusses a recent report from this agency, and their advice to place the children in specialised day care. Roughly 75% of the talk is spent discussing the implications of such an outplacement and mother's difficulty in accepting the social worker's view that her children need a neutral location to develop their relationship with their father. The access arrangement is the second topic of this first conversation, but it is central in the second encounter. In the family supervisor's view, the problems have to do with mother's limited ability to separate her own negative feelings for father from the interests of her children, their need to build a relationship with their father.

The analysis of the material began with a reading of the course of the conversations in their entirety. Parts of the transcripts in which participants refer to I-positions and/or we-positions were then selected. These extracts were then analyzed in detail, focusing on recurrent patterns and mechanisms common to some or all interactions, followed by analysis of which persons the we-positions refer to. The conversational context in which these positions occurred was also analyzed. Transcripts were then re-examined to see if I-positions and we-positions changed with the development of communication between professional and client.

Results

The start: Professional and client as 'we'?

During the two conversations, mother and family supervisor frequently use 'we' and by this 'we' they refer to different combinations of persons. Consider the following fragment:

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FS Yes... first, we'll talk a bit about that advice from the Riagg [mental welfare agency], right, because we went there together. Well, in fact the Riagg says: 'no , we don't think individual therapy would be appropriate for the children; what we do think, because we're really concerned about the children, after everything we've seen and heard about them, we think the best thing would be a place in a day care centre', where they can just be, you know - in a neutral place, right? And that's my view about what would be best for the children right now.

The family supervisor refers to two different positions. On its first two appearances, 'we' is used to indicate the mother and the family supervisor. The family supervisor justifies his assertion that supervisor and client must talk together by referring to their joint visit to the mental health agency. The emphasis on this joint visit may also be seen as a prospective justification of the advice of the Riagg that is to be discussed. This may also be considered a meta-remark, the family supervisor stressing the common enterprise he undertakes with mother, trying to convince her that they should work as a team. After all, they went to the Riagg together, so they should decide together what to do with the Riagg advice.

Following this, 'we' is used another five times, now referring to the professionals of the Riagg and stressing their coherence as a team of professionals. The supervisor operates as their reporter. It is relevant here that the supervisor does not say that 'they' came to a certain conclusion but presents a 'we'; this may be interpreted as approval of their assessment or at least a narrowing the difference between their professional views and his own.

It is significant that in the ambiguous last sentence of the fragment, the family supervisor seems to indicate that he agrees with the advice of the Riagg professionals and regards it as being in the best interests of the children. Now, the professional community is presented as a separate collective that takes a different position in the debate over what should happen with the children.

FS : Let's just talk for a minute about another matter, eh.... I really want to have a good look at this because I, um, we asked the Riagg for this [advice]. Well now, we got something back that we weren't entirely expecting, but in any case a..... a..... something else, which indeed I don't just want to put aside, because it's surely important advice, right? And we've said all along, haven't we: let's keep looking to see if there are things we could do to.... to stimulate that whole process or – perhaps in particular more so by Ineke – perhaps precisely on that emotional level. So that's what has registered with me.

In this fragment, the family supervisor makes a slip of the tongue and corrects the use of 'I' by 'we'. It is quite obvious that the family supervisor consciously wants to use the term 'we' as a demonstration of the joint nature of the enterprise with mother, stressing agreement (possibly in order to have more power to change a fixed I-position, later on); he repeats this communality several times, and then alternates the use of 'I' and 'we'. He says their advice should be taken seriously and justifies this by putting it again in the context of togetherness ('let's keep looking to see if there are things we could do to'). Realizing that mother has difficulty in accepting the advice (there is disagreement here), the family supervisor stresses their commonality as a means of encouraging her to give up her resistance.

The use of the past and future tense ('And we've said all along, haven't we: let's keep looking to see if there are things we could do to') stresses the continuity between asking together for an assessment, taking that advice seriously and using it in relation to measures in the future interest of the children. It is worth noting that the supervisor first formulates the goal of the family supervision order in such impersonal terms (to look for the best conditions for the children to develop prosperously), but then subsequently presents it as a common project of looking for changes rather leaving everything as it was. The supervisor's effort is enhanced by the topic change he suggests at the end of the turn.

1. FS But, well, in that advice, once again, Mr H describes, because his opinion was quite, in that sense quite clear and unambiguous.
2. M mhm.
3. FS But of course, I am curious what you have been thinking about it over the last weeks.
4. M well if I think about that advice then I still think by myself, I, I think that in this situation that advice is not the solution (eh) at all.
5. FS No.
6. M I don't think so.
7. FS No
8. M I absolutely wouldn't consider it, I'd really hoped that in some way a little bit of light would be shed on the real situation of the children, right?
9. FS Yes yes.
10. M Well, so then we'll have a look at what their condition really is.
11. FS Yes.
12. M So we can get a better idea of what we should do

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13. FS Yes
14. M But, well, this idea that they live under too great a stress at home, I don't agree with that, I don't believe it.
15. FS No no
16. M To plunge them into something just for that
17. FS No
18. M To do and to send, then all the time, I think that we talk about children we don't know very well, yet
19. FS Anyway, they don't know well [FS smiles and then mother also smiles].

In her reaction, mother also combines 'I' and 'we'. When the family supervisor stresses the position of the Riagg and asks mother's view (1/3), mother reacts by emphasizing her personal position as opposed to the expert's position and says she hopes for a more realistic proposal (4/6/8/). She continues in positive terms and formulates an alternative for the future in terms of 'we', emphasizing the strength of her option as the one that may be shared by the family supervisor. Now, mother uses the same technique to present herself together with the family supervisor a single team that will operate in the future as a unit. She then again takes up a personal opposition criticising the fact that the Riagg only has ideas unrelated to the specific situation (14); She then suggests a common understanding that children should be seen before they can be assessed (18). This seems to be an excellent strategic move by mother, not emphasizing her individual critical position towards the assessment, but referring by the use of 'we' to a community of rational and well-thinking people. In turn 19, with a confidential look, the family supervisor lines up with mother, and differentiates between the expertise of the Riagg ('they') and mother and supervisor.

Mother frequently shows her concerns about the supervisor's plans to take the children into day care. The supervisor tries to reassure mother that this will not put her out of the action but will even strengthen her position as an important person for her children. He emphasizes that he, as a clinical expert, knows that the placement will not split mother and children.

1. FS: So, I think that that, on the contrary, they would make you very important
2. M: Yes, but if you read well what in most cases is the reason to send children there, then I am very curious if they really would qualify for that. I don't recognise the situation.
3. FS: No.

4. M: Well, like the situation is here.
5. FS: No.
6. M: But, yes, if in the end, it would happen, then it might be a new experience and an adventure [laughs] to see how it works out.
7. FS: Yes
8. M: I myself say: 'Essentially, the situation is not like that'.
9. FS: No, why not?
10. M: Yes, because if they are just here at home and we get along together, then there is just no problem.

Mother, on the contrary, says that her case is not typical of the category of children that are placed there. In the last turns of this extract, mother extends the special non-child welfare situation of her children by positioning them as part of the family who, as she knows from the way they operate together, demonstrate no problems. It is relevant that the mother states this as an observation, which makes it harder for the supervisor to invalidate her argument. In turn eight, mother really emphasizes her personal view as different from the Riagg advice. In addition, she stresses that the three of them (presented as 'we') have no problem.

Family supervisor and mother alternately use the word 'we' to express their common intentions. Yet, after a while the family supervisor moves on to a more formal attitude by explaining the legal aspects of the advice of the Riagg, which may be considered by mother as an argument for placing the child in extra-familial care. Having said that even if the children are taken into day care mother will remain the most important figure, he reassures her that he would never place the children against mother's will.

1. FS: At the same time, neither the placement nor the registration at the Riagg and the day care centre of course, would ever really take place if you categorically refuse. Of course, that is also the way we try do it, simply to talk seriously about things, right?
2. M: Mhm
3. FS: Of course, I try to put forward arguments, let's say the pros and cons, and in that sense, let's say, to support you as a mother
4. M: ehum
5. FS: In the best interest of the children? Of course, after all, that's my job; that is why I don't ignore the advice of the Riagg. I don't ignore that because, well, you say: 'Well, I don't much feel for that'. But to talk, talk that out properly.

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6. M: Mmm
7. FS: Because if it's not possible now, it may be so in a little while. Or, or, in any case, I think, we really have to know what we're doing if we don't go along with it.

The supervisor explains the formal rules, and anticipates mother's possible fear of a mandate, but immediately casts the procedure in the context of a mutual effort to reach a rational agreement ('I try to put forward arguments') in a dialogical way ('simply to talk seriously about the things'). This is seen as the best way to lend support to her position as a mother. By separately mentioning her position as a mother, the supervisor seems to refer to possible other positions. He follows this with a remark about his task being to defend the best interests of children (expressed in general terms), implying the existence of possible differences between the interests of children (the advice of the Riagg) and mother (mother's rejection of that advice). The supervisor again mentions his dialogical strategy. Individual and common positions alternate continually. The main message of the family supervisors seems to be that the interests of mother and child may differ but that dialogue is the way to find solutions. In the last turn, the supervisor stresses this common course of action. It is interesting in this last sentence that the family supervisor projects (in my view) a we-position that is, in his eyes, still to be achieved ('we really have to know what we're doing if we don't go along with it').

1. FS: How do you regard the lag in the development of Jaap and Ineke. Did you observe this?
2. M: yes Jaap he really needed an extra year, that is very clear and now you just see maturity coming. Yes, actually, he is nearing group three and he already // starts to look // forward
3. FS: // yes yes yes //
4. M: and I wouldn't be at all surprised if he suddenly shot forward

The supervisor does not justify the Riagg assessment merely by referring to the fact that he shares their decision, but also by confirming the separate views of mother. The supervisor adds to his question mother's former observation that her children showed signs of retarded development. Mother's answer is sophisticated; she agrees that her son had clearly fallen behind but continues by asserting that he is quickly catching up.

Both mother and family supervisor frequently use personal pronouns to add force to their conversational position. The family supervisor stresses the common enterprise of mother and professional to negotiate and find the best solution for the child. This effort to create an atmosphere of shared intention is crucial for the

intervention process to continue. It is a strongly interactional strategy, explaining to the client that she belongs to the same team as the professional that (in the phase to come) and ought also to share their beliefs about what to do in the best interest of the children. The supervisor uses the common visit to the Riagg to get mother's permission to follow their advice to let her children go into day care.

Mother stresses her individual stand of resisting the Riagg intervention and stresses that the children could only be reliably assessed after having seen them. Moreover, mother uses 'we' to enforce her familial autonomy by presenting the situation as an 'attack' on her and her children.

Midway: Working on intrapersonal and interpersonal differences

Once a certain relational basis appears to have been established in their negotiations, mother and family supervisor position themselves more separately. In the next fragment, the family supervisor criticises mother for representing matters in black and white. Responding to this rather confrontational remark, mother demonstrates a level of self-reflection by stating that she is not the ideal mother and wants to be open to guidance. She thus shows that she is aware of her failures and wants to co-operate. By adding that an average mother is still good enough in normal circumstances, she seems to imply that she belongs to the group of average, good-enough mothers, and dismisses the notion of having to be perfect. She continues:

1. M: But you do have to be open to advice and support and correc/
correc/ correction
2. FS: Yes yes
3. M: (?)
4. FS: Can you actually do that? [smiles]
5. M: Yyyeah
6. FS: (to ask)
7. M: I think I'm gradually beginning to learn that
8. FS: Yes
9. M: first, first I want to know well if e it is reliable
10. FS: Yes
11. M: I do
12. FS: Yes I wanted to say for me you are not the prototype of someone
who brings all kinds of advice onto themselves or, or straight away eh
13. M: Well that // is because //

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14. FS: // (..?..) //
15. M: Because, because I used to look for the fault, and if people take advantage of that
16. FS: Yes
17. M: That makes you more careful
18. FS: Yes
19. M: With that
20. FS: Yes yes
21. M: Now yeah in contacts with other people who on the other hand confirm me I am
22. FS: Yes
23. M: And they show that the things you // you say and think are normal//
24. FS: //Yes yes yes yes //
25. M: So, gradually I am going through a process
26. FS: Yes
27. M: Now you have confidence in your self
28. FS: Yes yes yes yes
29. M: But that also mean that you take a vulnerable position well that you also you
30. FS: Yes // yes yes //
31. M: Show your weak sides // and then you grow.

The supervisor doubts mother's capacity to listen to advice whilst at the same time mitigating this derogatory judgement by smiling (4). Mother responds that she is learning but that much depends on how much trust she can put in other people. The family supervisor seems to acknowledge this by saying that, in his view, mother doesn't take the position many other parents take when they receive advice from others (12) Mother's position is clearly differentiated from a category of 'typical' child welfare parents. After characterizing mother's pertness, the family supervisor now seems to exclude her from a category of troublesome clients. Mother explains how her position towards the family supervisor is changing because her position as a reliable negotiator has been confirmed in other relations. Other people have encouraged her to trust herself and this has enabled her to show her vulnerable sides to these people; this in turn has

contributed to a change of her position in the context with the supervisor. It is described as a process that goes beyond the relations with those people and has been internalised. This has changed her I-position and enables her to adopt a vulnerable stance towards the family supervisor. It is significant that mother talks here in the second person singular about herself as though she is seeing herself from a distance.

1. FS: Yes, no sure, that is a healthy good process that you are going through right now. And then you indeed need confirmation. I think that without confirmation you get nowhere.
2. M: Yes but, but in fact, what you do; well, you always put my conviction my my opinion about that in in [question]. I can't accept that and there it goes again [more intonation and gesturing]. You act the opposite, as I say, you are too black white. It can't be the way I see it and in that I don't think the way you've operated has been optimal
3. FS: Mmm
4. M: Then you get a double eh
5. FS: Yes
6. M: Whereas the situation has been very heavy and you could consider it to be something special that we wrestled though this
7. FS: Yes
8. M: And that we came through like this.

The family supervisor acknowledges the relevance of the changes in mother's I-position. Mother cleverly does not pursue the matter of her alleged preconceptions of her former husband but, on a meta-level, draws attention to the supervisor's undermining response, which sets her back into old patterns of uncertainty. By stressing that they, meaning her children and herself, have overcome the hard times, she constructs the reaction as an attack against the three of them. She openly confronts the supervisor with the lack of confidence that she has experienced from him. At first, the family supervisor tried to present their relation as a common project, but now mother accuses him of undermining her individual position. She translates the disagreement between the family supervisor and herself as a relational lack of confidence, which may be the outcome of the uncertain nature of the relation between care and control. However, the family supervisor keeps a level head and in the next turn sticks to his point (emphasizing his I-position) that father is not the only cause of the problem (transcript is not printed here).

The family supervisor, on the other hand, also tries to differentiate different I-positions. In the next fragment, the family supervisor uses mother's clear individual

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position to lend force to his argument that mother plays a role in her children's problems.

1. FS: And that is exactly what I mean by this. As you said, it doesn't matter what it is about, but if it has to do with father then it will work out differently than with an adult woman, that's what you mean to say, // right?//.
2. M: //Yes//
3. FS: In fact, that is what I want to say, well, how the children understand it and what it then means for them, how they look at their father and how they look at you, that is really a very complicated matter
4. M: Yes
5. FS: Process
6. M: Yes the most important thing is that they themselves are able to say a lot and that you respond to it
7. FS: Indeed
8. M: // But that //
9. FS: // But that // that is the very problem. You are the mother, right? You have a certain view and experience of father, right? In that view, you give the children a lot of care, but you also provide them with an image of their father, of your former husband, of their father, which is of course not objective? The question is also how they, themselves, can develop an image of their father. I ask myself how much freedom, how much freedom do they really have?

The family supervisor draws a distinction between mother's two positions: her role towards her children and her role as an adult woman. He quotes her, when she said earlier that her remarks concerning father are interpreted differently by her children than her other remarks. Mother's position is also set apart from the position of her children. The supervisor explains that mother adopts two positions towards her children, a caring position that helped the children to go through difficult times, and another position in which she acts as the former spouse of the children's father, giving them biased information about him. This difference is amplified in the next fragment:

FS: ... that I think you, as a mother, you just have to be mother for your children right? And you should just be that, eh? But your very negative experiences with father make what you give the children quite emotionally charged and complicated, eh? I don't say that you don't do it well, I only say

that it will be very complicated for the children to receive that in a more or less clear fashion and then to manage that a little in the relationship with father.

Cautiously, the family supervisor tries to convince mother that it would be a good idea to distinguish her position as mother in relation to her children from her position as an adult woman. Repeatedly, he tells mother that she is a very caring and good mother to her children, but that she can't help giving her children a biased image of their father. This is another way of telling her that she cannot separate her negative feeling for her former husband from her maternal task of letting her children have contact with persons who are important to them.

In this middle phase of the encounter, both professional and client take clear individual positions, mother by showing how well she is developing in relationships with other people than the family supervisor, the supervisor by confronting mother with the negative consequences for her children of her biased position towards the children's father. Both participants also use 'we' to give emphasis to their individual positions,

The end phase: Confirming changed positions

In the first encounter, mother defends herself on a few occasions against the supervisor's suggestion that beside father she may also be a cause of the children's developmental problems.

1. FS: Last week, we talked about that, and yet I doubt if father is the only cause of the [clinical] picture of Jaap and Ineke.
2. M: In fact, the three of us have been the victim, and only if you step out can you recover.
3. FS: Yes
4. M: And I stepped out
5. FS: Yes//
6. M: // But of course, they did not fully step out.

The supervisor tries to broaden mother's outlook on the consequences of the divorce on her children. In response, mother withdraws to a defensive we-position and claims that all of them (she together with her children) were victims of father. But this we-position is then weakened by her remarks about the different dependencies on that relationship on the part of herself and her children.

At the end of the first conversation, the family supervisor justifies the family intervention by the need for a neutral person between the two quarrelling parents. He adds that in future he hopes the parents will learn to arrange the visits themselves and that this third party will no longer be needed. He then says:

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FS: In similar cases I am involved in, these problems do indeed play a role. That is indeed what it is about: children live with their father, mother has to return the children at eight and father gets very angry when it is a quarter past eight. Well, you can see that's absurd, right? In such cases, it is all about: eight o'clock is eight o'clock, the judge decided like that so the children have to be back home at eight o'clock.

The family supervisor pointedly refers to this case as a child welfare case in which he is acting as an expert ('we, as child welfare experts, who frequently deal with this kind of problem...'). This is quite a strong presentation of his institutional position. In this fragment, the professional quite obviously shows himself to be a representative of a moral collective and of community values. Every human society has to look after the interests of its more vulnerable citizens and here he presents himself as the one who controls the way the communal task of rearing children is carried out by parents.

The first encounter was dominated by the efforts of the family supervisor to convince mother that placing the children in specialised day care would be in the best interest of her children, and to persuade her to change her negative position regarding her former husband's access to the children. In the second encounter, the positions of both mother and family supervisor have shifted. The context changed because the children were taken into day care and the children had already paid their first visits to their father. Attention is still paid to the (general) condition of the children, but most of the talk is now about the access arrangement. At several points in the conversation the family supervisor tries to stress the common position and shared responsibility of mother and her former husband as parents of their children: in the next fragment, for instance:

FS: So something is working out, eh? That's great. At the same time, the whole problem between you and father, I feel that the way of dealing with the access arrangement is still important. That's why I asked you several times how you would continue with that, maybe achieve a kind of significant agreement. Because, of course, that has to do with the family supervision order, which may or may not be continued later. As I say, what have you, as parents, been able to manage on this.

In different words, the supervisor is repeating his justification of the family supervision order that he gave in the first encounter. Now he formulates it as a process that should be continued: a future decision about continuation of the order, and possible changes in parental positions. It is significant that the supervisor, instead of approaching mother in her individual position as the divorced spouse having trouble with her former husband (the whole problem between you and father), now adopts an approach to her in a we-position, as part of a couple who may have problems ('you, as parents'). In the

next fragment, this we-position is raised again, and is now described as a process ('achieved... grows... things arise'), a change from a problematic relationship to a stage of seeking solutions together.

1. FS: Well, look, of course, I would very much like to achieve that in the first place that should be done by sticking to agreements // eh? //
2. M: // Yes //
3. FS: From both sides. And if that, let's say, if that basis has developed and is more sound, then I hope that if things arise you will be able to solve them together [M nods] that no Solomon // and //
4. M: hmhm [nods/smiles]

The supervisor argues that the change he is trying to implement has to be supported by strict rules until mutual trust has developed and the clients ('you') can rule themselves. In the first encounter and the beginning of the second encounter, mother positioned herself still very much in opposition to father. In the last fragment, mother already – by nodding and smiling - seems to recognize the process of change that the supervisor wants to achieve. A few minutes later, mother says:

1. M: Hmhm, well, the first thing that comes into my mind: 'Well, if he likes to have them during autumn holiday, leave me the Christmas holiday, in any case, the week uninterrupted, the 22nd from the 22nd till, and then we might divide the rest of the days.
2. FS: Yes, and Christmas holiday is two weeks // and //
3. M: Yes, and we might divide the rest of the days.

It is worth noting that mother now speaks in terms of 'we', referring to her former husband and herself. It seems that the family supervisor has succeeded in regaining a little common ground for both parents, and a new we-position has been constructed, or an old one reconstructed. He has accomplished a sense of co-operation and a supportive attitude of mother to father so that they can take parental responsibility for their children.

Conclusions

I-positions and we-positions play a crucial role in tuning societal norms and expectations, and individual beliefs and practices. Professionals and clients try to defend their positions and to change the position of the conversational partner. This is certainly the case in child welfare conversations, as we have shown in a discourse analysis of a family supervision order. The results of this single case study can not just be extrapolated to other cases in child welfare. Further study is needed to analyze the relation between dialogical reorganization and the nature of the child welfare

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intervention with regard to intensity and structure. Next to that the coercive nature of the child welfare intervention has to be object of additional analysis, as the pace of change may very well be related to both the seriousness of the family problems and the supervisory character of the intervention.

In this case the personal pronouns 'I' (you) and 'we' (they) are used in several strategic ways. The use of 'we' contributes to an understanding of the relationship between professional and client as a common enterprise, and to the resolve to achieve agreement on crucial questions. It expresses the conviction that client and professional belong to the same community, aiming at similar social perspectives. In the light of the need for change in the family, it is relevant that the child welfare worker looks for common ground or inter-agreement, for this is more likely to lead to change at the intrapersonal level (Hermans, 1999b). A psychological space is then opened for the client and professional to differ in opinion. The use of 'I' in this context may be considered as a conversational manoeuvre to establish individuality, or even opposition. At the beginning of the conversation, the professional often uses 'we' to state his intention of teaming up with the client. In the middle section of the conversation, the professional stresses contrasts of opinion with the client. At first, the family supervisor carefully tries to persuade the parent to follow the advice of the Riagg, viz. to place the children in day care, but later, he openly confronts mother with the negative consequences of her prejudiced approach to the father. The family supervisor may assume that there is sufficient commonality to confront her with this critique without running the risk of losing contact with the mother. At several points the family supervisor softens the impact of his confrontations by saying that mother does not belong to the category of typical child welfare parents; this is again a reinforcement of mother's individual position but at the same time a good exception. It is worth noting that mother suggests to the family supervisor that he ought to be less critical and should support her in the way that her friends do.

Another strategic use of 'we' was mother defending her family (mother and children) against attempts (by the family supervisor) to divide them. When the family supervisor makes a distinction between mother's interests in obstructing a visit arrangement, and the interests of her children in having free access to their father, the mother defends her position by referring to their common experience as a family that has been through hard times. This is a common defensive strategy of clients employed to head off interventions.

A third strategy was to construct new groups that are considered to have a positive influence on the child's development. In this case, the problems between the parents are seen as a negative developmental context; in the second encounter, the family supervisor repeats his view that mother should try to distinguish her negative feelings towards her former husband from her maternal tasks. Now, he adds the

observation that the goal of the supervision order is to achieve a situation where the parents can together arrange visits without the interference of third parties. The family supervisor now addresses mother as part of a couple ('you'). This strategy appears to be successful as, for the first time, mother speaks of father and herself as 'we'.

Child care is an important social institution that helps to safeguard children and in doing so to maintain common standards about how to raise children. It is a vital link in the construction of a community with shared understanding and belief of how the best interests of children may best be served. Child welfare workers are significant moral agents of society confronting risky and improper child rearing practices and assisting parents who want to change their risky habits. I have analyzed the transformation processes as a complicated interaction between internal and external dialogues. What is the relevance of this for community psychology?

The strategic uses of pronouns ('we', 'I', 'you') in achieving social change in dialogues between professionals and clients have counterparts in the dialogues between institutions and groups. At a first level, the goal of community psychology will be to establish a relationship of mutual trust by stressing shared aims and interests. Institutional agents of change, like the child welfare worker in this case, do their utmost to start a dialogue with communities and to keep the communication open. Emphasizing commonality rather than introducing pre-packaged and unfamiliar social programmes is the way to success. When change agents and communities co-operate to gain common ground, the moment of social change comes closer ('It is important that *we* hear and understand *each other*, so that *we* can work out things *together* and find *common* solutions'). Fostering team spirit is the basis for achieving further transformations.

As soon as a minimal relationship between institutional agents and community has been established, some disagreements between them may then become acceptable. Positional differences will become more obvious, and may be supported by referring to group values, and by referring to we-positions. This study shows that institutional professionals create an interpersonal space that enables clients to modify their positions. They do so by emphasizing common intentions - in the case presented here, by seeking the child's best interests. That seems to be an ideal dialogical climate for clients to appropriate, in the words of Bakhtin, an 'internally persuasive discourse' that enables them to talk about their new perspectives in their own words. Once professionals and communities have found a team spirit, there is space for disagreement without the risk of losing trust in each other. A rational exchange of arguments may offer solutions and social change (in the community as well as in the institution) may then ensue. This may very well be a slow and laborious process: groups resist change because they feel change would be at odds with the norms and values of their community ('*you* may think that *we* should change *our* norms, but *we* feel that *you* do not understand what is going on in *our* community'). There is always a risk that the participants say what they think the others want to hear, in which case the change in the community may only be

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superficial, merely the outcome of an authoritarian institutional discourse (cf. Tappan, 2005). Especially at this time, when repressive institutional practices are gaining the upper hand again, it is important to keep looking for ways to enter into dialogue with communities in need. In order for the change to last, the interventions should connect to self-understandings and to such feelings as pride, belonging, and security, rather than distress, self-rejection, and disruption (Verkuijten, 2005). It should also support critical political awareness (Watts, 1999). For empowerment to be achieved, the community not only has to agree with the institutional agents about the desired changes but also to consider the social change as something that comes to belong to their community; so that their members may say: 'we, as members of this community see this ...'. The goal is to assist communities to talk about their new perspectives in their own words using a shared language.

Although child welfare interventions are often coercive, at the same time they are one of the last efforts to repair the disturbed contact between families at risk and society. It is widely accepted that the first choice is to keep children with their parents rather than to place them in an alternative setting; so, in the first place child welfare is directed at restoring the communication with these families. Although (rhetorical) manipulation can never be excluded and although power differences are at the heart of professional client relations, these professionals try to approach clients as dialogical beings in a non-imposing way (Guilfoyle, 2005). The major performance in these dialogues is to open up the dialogue and as a result make the necessary shifts in I-positions and we-positions more probable. The challenge is to look for that common ground, even in ambiguous institutional contexts like child welfare. It is surely the best instrument available to empower communities and allow citizens to regain a grip of their situation, both by stressing their individual positions as responsible persons and by emphasizing their common social responsibilities. The final aim is to build a strong community that can manage without institutional interference.

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