



The Construction of Parental Authority and Co-operation in Reports to the Dutch Court

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The texts of 21 reports presented to the court by Child Welfare and Protection (CWP) workers in the Netherlands were examined to explicate the meanings ascribed to ‘parental authority’ and ‘parental co-operation’. These constructs are central in CWP in recommending a Family Supervision Order, the most frequent measure practiced by the Dutch Juvenile Court to protect children from risk. Three types of parent-child relationship were described by this examination: (1) The child is portrayed as the cause for risk because of his personality problems; (2) The parent-child relationship is described as the risk; (3) The parent is described as carrying the risk because of his personality problems. Recommendations for a Family Supervision Order were made for all three groups. This recommendation was supported by the assessment of parental co-operation. Although four patterns of parental attitude toward professional help have been described, all ended up in presenting the parents as co-operative. The uniform recommendations made by the reporters as well as the uniform assessment of parents as co-operative indicate a parallel compliant position of the reporters *vis-a-vis* the court, as well as the construction of the parent as compliant in relation to the reporters.

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Introduction

Central to the discourse regarding state intervention in parent-child relationships is the concept of ‘parental authority’. The execution of parental authority refers to the quality of parental conduct in relation to the developmental

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perspectives of the child. Poor execution of parental authority that has been assessed as putting children's development at risk warrants an intervention in the family. Intervention is carried out to protect the best interests of the child, a concept which receives its specific meanings from the context within which it is used (Shiffman 1989). It plays a dominant role in defining children at risk as needing support, at times even without parental consent. The need to intervene in the privacy of the parent-child relationship to protect the child's interests is commonly decided by the court because of the conflict represented in such situations between the best interests of the child and the privacy of family relationships.

In the Netherlands these situations are discussed in the juvenile court which acts as a family court. Discourse analysis of the reports presented to the court may reveal how the construction of 'the execution of parental authority' is employed in convincing the court that compulsory intervention in the parent-child relationship is required. The Child Welfare and Protection Board (CWP Board) has an exclusive position in informing the court in situations where intervention in the family is warranted. The social worker conducting the investigation for the CWP Board attempts to understand how parents and children view and experience their predicament, and may also get information from professionals who are involved with the family. Although parents have the right to employ a contra expert, in practice they hardly ever take advantage of this. Commonly therefore, these workers have a monopoly on the information presented to the court before the judge meets with the parents and children.

Our study is an analysis of the stories that make up the reports of the CWP Board requested by the court in its capacity to decide whether a compulsory intervention in the form of a family supervision order is required. This study follows on earlier theoretical and empirical work on Dutch and Israeli child welfare discourse (van Nijnatten 1988, 1993; Mass 1995; Barkai & Mass 1998). The study is derived from a constructivistic theoretical framework and corresponds with other discourse analyses of child welfare and family law in France (Donzelot 1979), and Great Britain (Dingwall, Eekelaar & Murray 1983) and with analyses of social work practice and communication (Parton 1998; Stenson 1993; Hall *et al.*, 1997).

The Text of Law on the Supervision Order

If child's moral or mental interests or its health are seriously at risk, and help offered on a voluntary basis failed or is expected to fail, the juvenile judge can place a minor under supervision of a designated agency (art. 254 BW). This is the family supervision order. It is a temporary order that lasts a year. Such an order may be extended more than once at the request of the family supervisor, a parent, the one(s) who take(s) care of the child or, the CWP Board or at the demand of the Public Prosecutor.

Juvenile judges make a family supervision order when previous voluntary intervention by child welfare services did not improve the ability of the parent to care for the child. Often this failure was caused by the lack of parental co-operation. To convince the court that a family supervision order will benefit the child, the report should demonstrate that parental co-operation is close at hand. Hence, success is possible only if the parents are willing to work together with the family supervisor. It is the task of the CWP Board to assess the parental willingness to co-operate and it is an essential part of the report.

When a child is placed under family supervision order, parental authority is limited. Together with the parent(s), the family supervisor makes the important decisions concerning the child and marks out the contours of the child's upbringing. The goal of the family supervision order is to supervise the child, to offer help and support to the child and the parent and to try to restore family relationships so as to avert risks for the child. This is in line with the overall intention to prevent permanent order out-of-home placement and to leave parental authority (namely, the responsibility for the welfare and upbringing of the child) as much as possible with the parent.

Family supervision is the most frequent pronounced order in Dutch Family Law. It contrasts with two other family orders, one in which parents consent to relinquish parental authority and the other in which the court abrogates their authority. Whereas in these two orders parental authority is completely severed and the child is placed under the guardianship of a private agency that is authorized and paid by the government, the family supervision order only places parental authority under inspection. The family supervision order gets preference over the other two orders, according to the principle of proportionality i.e. the lighter measure should be preferred to a heavier one. Therefore, in first court hearings, dispossession of parental authority is decided only in a minority of the cases. In case parents do not agree to relinquish their authority, judges prefer to pronounce a family supervision order. At the end of the first year there is an assessment whether an improvement in parental conduct has taken place. If such an improvement is not observed, the judge may abrogate parental authority.

The out-of-home placement represents a more severe test for parental authority. Thus while parental rights are maintained the parent does not raise the child. State supervision is conducted on a day-to day basis by keeping the child under state surveillance.

The report of the Board has to contain the following arguments: the wellbeing of the child must be clearly at risk, whereas improvements are attainable so that full parental authority will be restored. The co-operation between the family supervisor and the parent is a necessary requirement.

The Design of the Study

The methodology

Our analysis of the reports is derived from the idea that discursive practices position people in a relational network by the use of certain concepts and descriptions (Harré & van Langenhove 1991). The construct of 'parental authority', and corresponding constructs such as 'parental conduct', 'developmental risk of the child', represent the way CWP workers position parents and children. Our analysis of CWP reports attempts to reveal the positions ascribed to children and parents.

We analysed the constructions employed by social workers of the Dutch CWP Board to determine the quality of parental authority. We did so by analysing the story lines in which the relationship between parents and child are constructed. The interpretations made in the reports are revealed by decoding their construction of the facts that are contained in their descriptions of the cases. To do this, we looked in the text looked for three types of narrative constructions: the use of qualifying, evocative and logical (re)constructions of the facts reported. This typology is inspired by the classification system developed by Bennett & Feldman (1981).

(1) Factual events are qualified in terms of external standards. These standards may be based on scientific knowledge or moral values. This means that professional statements carry with them the authority of knowledge and societal norms and can hardly be contradicted by a layman. An example of scientific-based construction is: "Beside the impotence and problems of his parents, there is the possible question of ADHD". Attention-deficient hyperactive disorder is an empirically based assessment and can be determined by an expert only. An example of a normative standard: "The mother has called only once...". The use of the word 'only' suggests that the reporter represents 'motherhood' as assessed by the frequency of calls, and this mother does not measure up to this norm.

(2) Evocative construction is used to arouse certain feelings in the reader. By the use of particular wording people are stereotyped. "The mother rents a little apartment", in contrast with the father who owns a big house. This construction, which does not necessarily has any bearing on parental conduct, situates the mother in a category of people in poor economic circumstances and bad neighborhoods that can easily lead to the stereotype of people whose personal resources are impoverished. Some biased words create emotional reactions that are intended to affect the reader in a certain way. "The mother persists in her claim not to know why". By the word 'persist' and 'claim' the reporter indicates that he does not fully believe what the mother says; i.e. she may be lying.

(3) Logical construction anchor the facts reported in a certain order that presents a particular sense of logic. For example, all reporters in this study conclude their reports with parental consent to the family supervision order. In

some of the reports this final agreement has been preceded by descriptions of strong parental resistance. In no report did we find that this resistance cast a doubt on the consent given later by the parents. On the contrary, the sequence of the report, first resistance and then consent, logically grants the parental consent extra credence.

The data collection

Twenty-one reports of a CWP Board in a region of medium size in the Netherlands were analysed. We analysed only cases in which the juvenile judge ordered both family supervision and out-of-home placement for the child. Because as mentioned before, these cases represent a more severe test for the conflict between the intent to preserve parental rights and the assessment that the best interests of the child would be best served by the state. All cases were brought to the court for the first time between April and November 1998. Most children in these cases were between 12 and 15 years old. The content of the files were analysed by two raters and controlled by two others raters.

The Findings

Three different story lines were found in our study. These scripts are functional in affecting the court's decision that compulsory intervention is needed.

Good parents with unmanageable children (N=8)

In these story lines, parents are described as good and willing people who tried anything to solve the serious problems of their child, whereas the descriptions of the children show that they have serious behavioral problems that manifest in deviant and disturbed conduct. The problems of the children are described as pathological, and therefore the parents cannot do without professional support.

For example, in one of the reports, the child is positioned as a certain kind of a person: "John is preoccupied, does not pay attention and cannot concentrate". John's conduct is described as deviant and against the norms of how to behave in a proper manner: "John plays dangerous games like starting fires, damaging property, stealing money, and being aggressive towards people and animals". This description is further on connected to the personality of the boy. His problems with concentration are a useful leg for a social scientific discourse on John: "John shows psychiatric and behavior related problems [...]. John has a negative self-image and demands permanent attention through his negative behavior", and: "At school, he is severely retarded. His cognitive, social and emotional development is significantly affected in varying degrees".

The reader may now conclude that John's risky and deviant conduct is due to his low self-esteem, poor cognitive faculties and psychiatric problems. As a conclusion, the reporter says that the boy needs treatment for what is defined as a malignant process. This is presented as the main reasons to ask the judge for an intervention in the family: "John needs a social climate that is well structured. Besides, he needs counselling and therapy. The disturbances of this boy are too complex for ambulatory assistance. John needs intramural care to come out of his passivity and depression". This case shows a psychological reconstruction of the boy's transgression of normative borders. His deviant conduct is put in the frame of his character. Later on this stereotyping characterization is transformed into a complex of problems categorized in psychological or psychiatric terms, which in turn suggest that professional intervention could bring about change. By this reconstruction, moralization is seemingly precluded (Donzelot 1979). At the same time that it portrays the child's problems as stable and not amenable to environmental influence. Moreover, the use of 'neutral' social scientific terms makes professional intervention in the form of a family supervision order inevitable.

In the same case, the parents are pictured as willing to care for their son and want the best for him. Their good will further accentuates the need of the child for professional intervention. "The parents indicate that they hope that John will get the help he should have, so that he will grow up to be an integrated member of society. They are afraid that if things go on like this, John will lapse into criminality. They want to prevent that at all costs". Parents who maintain such hopes are considered by conventional norms to be good parents. Furthermore they raise three other children successfully. They co-operate fully with the social worker and are looking forward to help. Concluding the report with the parents' admission of their limitations reinforces the benefit of professional help that is guided by the "measure" of "good parenting". A statement that began by a description of the severe problem of the child and ends with such an admission presents professional help as the only logical. "The parents indicate that they are worn out. They do not want and cannot bear the responsibility of caring for John. The mother states that she still has some reserves, but the father clearly testifies that he can no longer bear that responsibility".

In this group the child is clearly described as the source of the problems in the family. The parents are depicted as good parents whose conduct with their other children seem appropriate. Yet, the problems of the child are portrayed as being so severe that parents are faced with grave difficulty in handling them. The parents are portrayed as willing to be helped and seem to demonstrate good ability to benefit from such help. The reports do not clarify why in the face of this willingness intervention has to be imposed in the form of a court order.

Disturbed parent-child relationships (N=10)

This type of story-line mentions disturbances in the parent-child relationship. Although some of the reports portray the children as difficult and as having serious conduct problems, it is not their difficulties that are portrayed as the risk factor, as in the first groups but rather as the interaction between their difficulties and the parental conduct that is not beyond reproach. For instance, in the case of Simon, the reporter describes clearly the problematic conduct of the boy: "Simon shows a general lag of 1 year in development. One could say that he has an attention deficit without hyperactivity: ADHD of the inattentive sort", and: "Simon restricts mother's daily life". But the reporter also points at some weak points in the attitude and capacities of the mother: "The mother has problems in setting limits and being consistent. She would rather pamper the children to prevent arguments. So now and then, daily life has quite a chaotic course. The mother will have to take charge of her authority, instead of being dominated by daily events" and: "The mother did not feel acknowledged by the medical-welfare agency, and she got the idea that Simon's behavioral problems were caused by her. As a consequence of this and of the nature of the problems, one could wonder to what extent the mother understands her own acts and Simon's conduct. It is possible that Simon's conduct is a reaction to the deficit of structure in the upbringing, the loss of the father and mother's isolation". Again the descriptions of the child are based on empirical knowledge which portrays him in terms of organic deficit. At the same time, serious normative deficits in parenting are described.

The ascription of risk to the parent-child relationship characterizes this group of story lines also in cases where no difficulty attributed to the child's constitution or personality. In fact, the troubles of the children are constructed as the result of the relationships with the parents. "According to the pediatrician the child is clearly a victim of abuse and neglect. Twice Ann suffered a leg fracture and once a skull base fracture. It is unusual for such a young child to suffer a skull base fracture. The pediatrician doesn't think it is a good idea for Ann to go back home again". No mistake can be made that this child has been abused. Yet the logical presentation of the facts does not contain a direct statement in the report that the parents are the ones who harmed the child, nor that they are to be held responsible for not being able to guarantee the safety of their child. By refraining from explicating their conduct, the parents' part in the bad condition of the child is omitted. When the focus is placed only on the condition of the abused child the reporter, in fact, excuses the parents. This enables the reporter to simultaneously 'show' the necessity of an intervention and to ask for a family supervision order rather than abrogation of parental authority. The attention of the reader is averted from such qualifications with regard to parental conduct either in terms of their personalities or their deviant conduct. Their conduct is

described as the effect of stressful events and difficult patterns of interactions either between themselves or with the child.

In either case, whether the description of the child is qualified by either empirical or normative standards or not, the particular characteristic of this group is the sympathy evoked for the parent in spite of their obvious limited conduct. The latter is attributed to life circumstances. Another strategy to rescue parents whose parenting is not beyond dispute is the use of logical construction by presenting conflicting versions of what happened in the family. For an example, the parents contradict their daughter's narrative. "She said that she could not stay at home with the father because of the problems. Her father might have abused her since she was 10. It stopped when she was 13. The father would ask her to come into his room and scratch his back and then started to touch her body in private places [. . .]". The parents: "According to them, Linda would invent reasons to run away from home and get more freedom. At another moment Linda would say that her father had abused her. Linda also says that in her dreams her father abuses her. According to the mother, the abuse by the father cannot be true. The father denies the abuse of his daughter. Generally, the father frequently hugs his children, but he does so because he loves them. The father denies that he felt her up. Recently, Kim (younger sister) does not accept the hugs of father. The father always hugs his children in public and now he is aware that Linda does not appreciate it any more. The father promised that he would stop it and that he did not harbor any intention to carry on with this behavior".

By presenting two different versions of the family events, the reporter presents himself/herself as neutral. Yet, indirectly the reader is led to believe that the parent's version is the valid one. The parental narrative that recounts the father's good intentions contradicts Linda's story. The logical construction places the parent's story after Linda's while the reporter does not offer any conclusions. However, by adding the word 'would', he underlines that the tale of the sexual harassment is not his story, but apparently the girl's invention. On the other hand, the explanation of father's hugs is presented without any reservation. The reader is invited to take the story of the parents as facts and to understand the tale of the daughter as her subjective view of the father's behavior. The father is 'saved' and this increases the chances that by cooperating with the supervision order their parental authority would be restored in the future.

Another strategy to give the parent the benefit of the doubt is to present a history of rehabilitation. In the beginning, the reporter presents the past of the parents as negative (by the use of qualifying construction) and then in the course of time, the parent is described as able to bounce back. By this reconstruction, the reporter indicates his hope for the future, as the following example illustrates: "The guardian related that the mother's prostitution was of course particularly sad, but he emphasizes positively that the mother herself recognized that she was not yet ready to resume the care of her children".

The reporter evokes the reader's sympathy for the mother's reverting to prostitution, rather than condemning her for it. In the end, the mother requested to be reassessed and the CWP Board makes the following considerations: "The guardian says that the mother has come back again with this request, about which initially he had great doubts. In the meantime, contacts with the mother have shown him clearly that she was fairly and truly on the right path", and: "The mother is an extremely strong woman who really fights hard for her future, in which her children are most important. Since her arrival on [dd], much has already changed. The mother has become significantly quieter, shows greater insight into her situation, is co-operative and is busy both with her education and her accommodation. The mother is making good progress in learning how to deal better with her own emotions". The final conclusion of the Board is: "the mother, also in view of her constant commitment to her children, should be given the chance to take into her own hands again the upbringing of Janet. Therefore the mother will need much support, as the current guardian and her counselors in the women's refuge emphasize. [...] A supervision order offers the kind of structural and formal framework that will certainly be necessary". It is important to note that none of the characteristics, which are specified by the reporter, relates directly to the actual conduct of parenting. The mother is described, at first, quite negatively and in the end she earns the benefit of the doubt by being persistent in her feelings for her children. By putting the negative descriptions first and the positive last, the reporter logically constructs a promising biographic pattern. By underlining her persistent fidelity to her children, the mother is portrayed as a reliable ally who can regain parental authority, the child's interests are considered almost as an afterthought: "Not in the least because this seems to be the best solution for Janet".

A main instrument in evoking faith in the parent's ability is the discriminate use of passive and active forms in structuring the descriptions of the parents. The negative descriptions of the parents are stated in the passive form: "She was involved in prostitution as a result of a problematic past", and the positive ones in the active: "Meanwhile the mother, who has always had it in mind to look after her children herself, has made several attempts to get her life back on an even keel. In early '93 the mother returned to the Netherlands. She succeeded in beating her addiction (cocaine) but to extricate herself from prostitution was more difficult".

In order to convince the court that a supervision order is required the CWP has to portray parental conduct as seriously putting the child at risk. At the same time, the reporter has to explain that parental conduct and capacities are not too poor so that future amelioration of the family conditions would be realistic and the parents would be able continue parenting without the help of a family supervisor, after the order is terminated. Thus narratives of (sexual) abuse are constructed as serious family problems without blaming parents directly. This low profile of parental abuse prevents a conflict with the

parents, and as will be elaborated on serves to guarantee parental cooperation with the order. In these cases, so it seems, the reporter considers that the best interest of the child is to 'save' the parents.

Poor parenthood (N=3)

In some reports we found scripts in which parenting is explicitly assessed as poor because of a deviant life style or parental mental disabilities. This endangers the child's development. The familial conditions do not legitimate a family supervision order. The story line indicates that abrogation of the parental authority should have taken place, but as already pointed out initially the judge prefers to pronounce a family supervision order even if such a decision entails an out-of-home placement for the child. Only after one year, if no change takes place, will parental authority be abrogated.

Our analysis of the reconstruction made in these reports indicates that the way lost parents live their life is at odds with raising children. They tramp about and in one case the social worker could not even trace the mother to discuss the family supervision order with her. In the report we could not find any remark which points to her ability as a mother. By using qualifying construction the reader is left with little hope that there will be any changes in the future condition of the mother. For example, "At the end of the year, the mother became psychotic in the presence of Jim. She was then hospitalized". Moreover with a construction such as "The mother was taking prescribed medication following her release from the institution, but after awhile she refused to take the medicines considered necessary. After a short while, things got worse as a result of this", the mother is being blamed for intentionally contributing to her illness. It is clear that Jim's development is endangered because the mother is depicted as irresponsible: "Jim was often on his own at home, went to school independently and found his mother at home asleep when he returned. He felt responsible and stayed up in the evenings to wait for his mother"; and: "He was afraid that his mother would kill his cat. Once his mother thought that her ex-husband had become the cat. She wanted to beat 'him' to death with a club".

In this type of cases no plans are offered to restore the relationship between the parents and the child. It is obvious that the child is better off away from the family. The parents of Diana are divorced and mother has custody over Diana. "The mother had an air of great anxiety. In this, the mother is inconsistent. On the one hand, she expresses that she is very much concerned about Diana, on the other hand she blames Diana for a couple of things [...]. The mother is not open for the explanation that [...] She is a little rash in drawing her conclusions. She often looks at things from the dark side". The mother is depicted quite clearly as incapable. Although we did not find any positive remarks about the father's capabilities to take parental responsibility, in the

rest of the report, the father appears to be a useful partner in depicting the mother incapable. "He asks the care agents to join hands and look together for a solution" and "The father gives the impression that he wants to do everything to help his daughter get out of her problems. He helped her each time she moved and he acknowledges her problems. He knows how worse off the mother is and understands that Diana has problems in coping with her". The reporter may use the father's remarks as a confirmation of his choice not to expect a future reunion of mother and daughter. "The father asks the CWP Board to divest the mother of her parental authority" and: "In the father's opinion, the mother plays her cards well, she makes every helper believe her story. Yet, the father indicates that Diana now needs clarity and structure and that this is the only way to achieve anything with her". The father portrays the mother as a manipulator who should not be trusted and the reporter does not give any indication that the father's report can be doubted.

In these three reports the parents are constructed as incapable, they seem to be lacking any potential to carry out their parental authority. The constructions 'prove' that they will never again be able to look after their children properly. There is an apparent gap between this portrayal of the parents and the recommendation for a family supervision order.

The Construction of Parental Co-operation

A main reason for juvenile judges to pronounce a family supervision order is that previous intervention offered on a voluntary basis did not result in the required improvement in parental capacity to care for the child. Often this failure was caused by lack of parental co-operation. To convince the court that a family supervision order will benefit the child, the report should demonstrate that parental co-operation is close at hand. Although the family supervision order is coercive, success is possible only if the parents are willing to work together with the family supervisor. It is the CWP Board aim to engage the parents in the process of planning the solution for the problems. His\her success in carrying out this goal is presented in the report. Each report of the CWP Board, therefore, ends with a standard sentence with regard to the attitude of the parents to the family supervision order. All parents reported in our study agreed to co-operate with the supervision order, in spite of the initial resistance expressed by some. Yet, we found four different scripts in which this final agreement is reconstructed.

(1) Descriptions of parental collaboration with helping agencies were all found in the first type of story lines, in which parenthood was presented as caring but insufficient to manage seriously disturbed children (five cases). "In connection with the problems of Elisabeth, the parents got in touch with the Regional Institute for Mental Welfare". In another case the firm character of the

parental attitude is described: "The mother wasn't and isn't negative about this measure". In the next case, the parent even asks for an intervention of the court: "The father asked for mandated help at this moment, in order to prevent that the intervention will take place only after things will have gone out of hand".

These story lines present a continuous co-operative parental attitude. The parents are depicted as capable parents who seek help if they cannot manage themselves. They are not blamed for the difficulties of their child, but rather praised because of their co-operation with professional help.

(2) In three reports the readiness of the parent to co-operate with the family supervisor is stated only after the negative attitude of the parent towards other helping agencies was depicted. Giving up their resistance, parents are considered to be open to help and advice. By acknowledging the initial hesitation and resistance, the final success of the transformation process is underlined: "The father finds it hard to accept the residential placement, but agrees that at the moment it is the only solution". The fact that the father gave his consent to the out-of-home placement, although it was hard for him is presented as an assurance of his co-operative attitude of this parent. And: "The mother now sees that a family supervision order (and possibly an out-of-home placement) of Boris is necessary, because she does not have any hold on him. The SPD (agency for social and pedagogical advice) advised her this before, but at first she wanted to try to manage it on her own".

The cases in which an obvious change in parental attitude could be seen were all from the first category in which the problems of the child were considered to be the main reason for the intervention in the family. The logical construction whereby a negative attitude toward help is followed by a welcoming posture. After all, they did their utmost best to manage it on their own and find it hard to accept that they can no longer keep this child at home.

(3) In four reports we found a script of a refusing and resisting attitude of the parent. All three cases of 'lost' parents appear in these (negative) story lines. It reinforces the image that there are no realistic perspectives on an improvement of the developmental situation of the child. "The father could not come for the first meeting. Thereupon, they cancelled the next appointment. We were informed that the mother was in the hospital with her son and that later in the afternoon she would visit the Board. But then again, she did not appear". The final acceptance of the family intervention is not very convincing in this type of story line.

One couple did not react to the invitation of the reporter to read the report and comment on it. The report was explicit in stating that the parents were not aware of their responsibility to co-operate with the Board. "Voluntary help is insufficient because of the seriousness of the problems and because former voluntary help did not get off the ground. During the investigations, the parents also did not take any initiatives to look for support. The parents are not

aware of the possibilities to improve their situation". It is not clear what the conclusion that these parents are willing to co-operate with the family supervision order is based on, unless parents have no alternative but to consent.

(4) In this category (nine cases) the co-operative attitude of parents is ambiguous, but not plainly lacking. It seems that the reporters deal with these ambiguities by balancing the assessment of parental compliance with other qualities. On some occasions, the assessment of other factors portrays the lack of compliance as carrying less weight, and in others parental compliance is served to cover up the negative assessment of parental conduct. Pending on the logical construction, one or another picture is presented as the more profound. The attempt seems to be always to give the parents the benefit of the doubt. "The mother collaborates on all engagements, which indicates that she wants to co-operate both with the investigation and with the family supervision order. Yet, the mother seems to be ambiguous. She indicates that she would do everything for Ann, whereas among others the hospital relates that she doesn't keep her appointments". The mother's ambiguous attitude is excused. She may have a post-traumatic stress syndrome. "At that time, things seemed to be more than she could take: her work, the children and then also professional help. The mother suffered from a migraine for a few weeks. She stopped working and terminated the support unilaterally". On other occasions, positive remarks about their parenting redefine the negative attitude towards co-operation in a more positive perspective.

To sum up this aspect of parental co-operation: all parents are reported to agree with the family supervision order. The doubt aroused concerning the validity of such a uniform response is further accentuated regarding two groups, the willing and caring parents and the resistant parents. More than consent this uniform agreement might imply compliance. Such a compliant position is reflected also in the fact that no comment made by the parents concerning the report itself is cited. Parents always get the opportunity to read the report and give their consent. However, no parental response to the report is mentioned in any of the cases reviewed in this study.

Discussion

We analysed 21 reports written by the CWP Board. Although in the end all reports resulted in a family supervision order, we distinguished three types of family description with matching story lines. In the first story line, good, willing parents are presented as parents who care for their child, but cannot handle their difficult conduct. They gladly accept extra help with managing the serious developmental problems of their child. They are happy to work together with the family supervisor to improve the child's chances.

In contrast to this type of script are the cases in the third category, in which parents were constructed as failing in their conduct. The conclusions

of these reports are definite: an intervention is needed and the parent does not have a realistic chance to ever raise his child without professional help and without legal supervision. Although they all agreed with the recommendation for a family supervision order, it is possible that this consent is only formal. After all, the parents may know that if they do not agree, the Board and the court may consider more drastic measures.

Between these two poles on the range of parental conduct we find the cases in which the conclusions of the Board are much more vague. The general strategy is to emphasize the problems of the child and to keep all options about future interventions in the family open. In spite of some serious failures of parental conduct the workers employ different strategies to 'rescue' the parents so that parental authority would be left with them. Even in the case of assumed sexual child abuse, the parents are 'rescued' by pointing at disturbed family relations rather than their actions. In a minority of the cases, the children's problems are described as serious in terms of persistent rule-breaking and/or grave developmental disturbances. This construction leaves little room for interpretation. The children's problems are characterized quite clearly. In contrast, parents are described more vaguely. There are some clear-cut remarks about domestic circumstances and work. Although these facts contribute to the construction of a certain image of the environment in which the child is brought up, no clear assessment of parental conduct is made. In this category, we found hardly any descriptions of personality disorders of the parents, deviant behavior or other traits that in one way or another would characterize the parents.

Reporters have at their disposal an arsenal of sophisticated means to construct the line of these scripts, to elevate some story lines and to mitigate other lines. Positive impressions of parents may be reinforced by the use of the active form in describing their positive acts while their negative acts are stated in the passive form, as though they just happen to them.

In the descriptions of divorced parents, we found another strategy. In the presentation of facts and opinions, the version of one of the parents may be used in the report with approval while that of the other parent is rejected. The reporter may show his approval of what the parents says by presenting their version as his/her own statements, whereas the version of the other parent is clearly presented only as the opinion of that parent. By adding sentences like 'mother says' and 'according to father' it is implied that the reporter does not necessarily agree.

The construction presented in the reports is based on biographies in which historical continuity is projected. The paradigm which views stable traits as an explanation (Mass 1994) seems to be dominant in these reports. It is used however only when the classified person is portrayed as the one who causes the problems. When the construction exempts a person (the parent or the child) from responsibility relational and situational terms are used.

Conclusions

As mentioned above the sample selected for the study consisted of cases that represent a severe test of parental authority. Three profiles of parenting were described by the data whereby parental conduct is described as insufficient to deal with serious child pathology, as problematic or as failure. Yet all parents described in our data get the benefit of the doubt. Much depends on the co-operation of the parents: their willingness to work together with the agencies paves the way for the family supervisor to implement the intervention in the planned way. The reporter uses various discourse strategies to construct an image of the children and parents involved that almost inevitably leads to the final conclusions that family supervision order is required. This uniform conclusion is arrived at in very different story lines by the employment of the various structures. Our analysis indicates a persistent pattern in which reporters present the facts to serve the implementation of intervention in the form of family supervision orders. It appears that the reporter would rather overlook suspicions of reprehensible conduct of the parents than blame them. It seems as though the reporter conceives only of either blaming the parents or exempting of them. Responsibility in terms of *responsiveness to the child* (Mass 1999), is portrayed as *accountability to authorities* that is expressed by the high profile granted to the co-operation with child welfare services and the legal authority.

The idea of positioning may serve to explain this pattern. The reporters seem to comply with the attempt to prefer a family supervision order. They do this either by recommending such an order when the parents themselves seek help and the use of compulsory measures seems questionable (the first type of scripts), or by recommending family supervision when parenting is portrayed as poor and no prospect of improvement is reported (the last type of scripts). While the limited adherence to facts in legal intervention in the family has already been documented (van Nijnatten 1988), the particular construction found in the present study raises a serious question. The attempt of the reporters to comply with the preference of family supervision order parallels the position ascribed by them to the parents. Parents hardly appear as people whose behavior is reprehensible but as good, willing people in trouble. Oddly, perhaps, children are more often positioned as 'owning' their problems than parents are. The particular positioning of parents reveals a strategy that refrains from confrontation with parents, possibly in the service of using compliance as a mode of control. The paramount significance of parental compliance may indicate also the attempt of the CWP Board workers to preserve their place in regard to intervention with these families. Other recommendations such as voluntary help for the child (in the first type of scripts) or the termination of parental rights (in the last type of scripts) would lead to the exclusion of these workers from these cases.

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