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Dealing with risk in situations of poverty: when complexity in frontline practice becomes wallpaper for organisational policy

Omgaan met risico's in armoedesituaties: wanneer complexiteit in de eerstelijnspraktijk 'behangpapier' wordt voor organisatiebeleid

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ABSTRACT

A recent body of research draws on the concept of child welfare inequality and shows that social inequalities, such as poverty, are reproduced in and through child welfare and protection interventions. We therefore examine how the recent preoccupation with risk relates to ways in which frontline social workers in child welfare and protection deal with poverty. Our contribution is based on a qualitative research project in a governmental organisation in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) that implements the Australian risk assessment method Signs of Safety (SofS). We explore how frontline social workers who implement Signs of Safety in Flanders deal with risk in situations of poverty, and identify four strategies of discretion in dealing with poverty: (1) poverty as a complicating factor, (2) poverty as a concern, (3) poverty as an undercover concern for social workers, and (4) poverty as a social problem that requires structural responses. Our research findings particularly show that the interaction of frontline social work with organisational policy is crucial. Rather than framing poverty as 'the wallpaper of frontline practice', we argue that the complexity and struggle at stake in frontline practice becomes 'wallpaper' for child welfare and protection organisational policy in Flanders.

SAMENVATTING

Recent onderzoek is gebaseerd op het concept van ongelijkheid in kinderwelzijn en toont aan dat sociale ongelijkheden, zoals armoede, worden gereproduceerd in en door interventies in kinderwelzijn en kinderbescherming. We onderzoeken daarom hoe de recente preoccupatie met risico's zich verhoudt tot de manier waarop eerstelijns sociaal werkers in kinderwelzijnszorg en – bescherming omgaan met armoede. Onze bijdrage is gebaseerd op een kwalitatief onderzoeksproject in een overheidsorganisatie in Vlaanderen (het Nederlandstalig deel van België) die de Australische risicobeoordelingsmethode Signs of Safety (SofS) toepast. We onderzoeken hoe eerstelijns sociaal werkers die Signs of Safety in Vlaanderen implementeren omgaan met risico's in situaties van armoede, en identificeren vier strategieën van discretie in het omgaan met armoede: (1) armoede als complicerende factor, (2) armoede als zorg, (3) armoede als undercover zorg voor sociaal werkers, en (4)

KEYWORDS
Child welfare and protection; discretion; organisational culture; Signs of Safety

KERNWOORDEN
jeugdbescherming en jeugdzorg; discretie; organisatiecultuur; Signs of Safety

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armoede als sociaal probleem dat structurele antwoorden vereist. Onze onderzoeksresultaten tonen in het bijzonder aan dat de interactie van eerstelijns sociaal werk met organisatorisch beleid van cruciaal belang is. In plaats van armoede te framen als 'het behangpapier van de eerstelijnspraktijk', stellen we dat de complexiteit en strijd die in de eerstelijnspraktijk op het spel staan 'behangpapier' wordt voor het organisatiebeleid inzake welzijn en bescherming van kinderen in Vlaanderen.

Introduction

Poverty and social inequality have far-reaching consequences for the lives of children and families. This provides major challenges for child and family social work (Bradt et al., 2015; Bywaters et al., 2018; Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Roose et al., 2014). In that vein, a recent body of research draws on the concept of child welfare inequality, defined as 'the unequal chances, experiences and outcomes of child welfare that are systematically associated with social advantage/disadvantage' (Bywaters, 2015, p. 9), and shows that social inequalities are also reproduced in and through child welfare and protection interventions (Bradt et al., 2015; Bywaters et al., 2017, 2018; Featherstone et al., 2017; Stokes & Schmidt, 2011). In this body of research, poverty is perceived as a typical example of social inequality (see Bradt et al., 2015; Stokes & Schmidt, 2011) and as a social problem that is extremely complex to deal with by individual practitioners (Lorenz, 2016; Roose et al., 2014).

A diversity of scholars has argued that this is particularly the case since child welfare and protection systems are dominated by a preoccupation with safety, security and risk, and obsessed with the vexed question how to reduce, prevent and control insecurities and risks (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Scourfield & Welsh, 2003). Research evidence shows that social workers in child welfare and protection tend to name specific risk factors as being at stake in families in poverty situations rather than embracing complexity and identifying broader socio-economic circumstances and inequalities (Bywaters et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2018; Roose et al., 2014). This raises profound ethical, political and practical questions and dilemmas for child welfare and protection practices (Bywaters et al., 2015, 2018; Morris et al., 2018). In that sense, Morris et al. (2018, p. 370) have observed that poverty might be considered the wallpaper of frontline practice in child welfare and protection: it is 'too big to tackle and too familiar to notice'. However, in the face of this risk-driven focus, social work might continue to contest poverty and still frame poverty as a violation of human rights and social justice (O'Brien, 2011; Boone et al., 2018a). Krumer-Nevo (2016) recently made a call for the development of poverty-aware practices, in which practitioners engage in a critical analysis of the reproduction of poverty and social inequality through child welfare and protection systems (see Bunting et al., 2018; Hood, 2014), and take a stance 'as partners of parents in their struggle against oppressive social contexts in which their parenting takes place'(Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019, p. 13).

In this article, we therefore discuss the findings of a qualitative research project that took place in the Youth Welfare Agency, the governmental organisation responsible for child welfare and protection, in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). The main research objective of the project was to examine how the recent implementation of the Signs of Safety approach in Flanders relates to ways in which frontline social workers deal with risk in situations of poverty, and whether they employ poverty-aware rather than poverty-blind approaches in their everyday practice development. Our research interest concentrated on frontline social workers' strategies of discretion as being intrinsically dependent on the organisational policy in which they operate (Carson et al., 2015; Evans, 2011). In the next section, we therefore first situate and contextualise the approach to risk child welfare and protection policy and practice has been employed by the Youth Welfare Agency in Flanders, and address how Signs of Safety is implemented.

The Signs of Safety scene in Flanders so far

In 2013, a large-scale and top-down organisational reform was implemented that restructured the field of child welfare and protection in Flanders for the provision of intersectoral and joined-up public services, ranging from a wide diversity of directly accessible to mandatory child and family services (Vlaams Parlement, 2013). The rationale of the reform was to strengthen the principle of subsidiarity: child protection services and practices were seen as more intrusive and expensive than the services and practices that are underpinned by a child welfare perspective, and therefore should be avoided where possible (Vyvey et al., 2014).

Since this reform, risk assessment features as a central aspect in the system to regulate the intake of children and youngsters into mandatory services. The Youth Welfare Agency therefore recently implements the Australian Signs of Safety model (SofS). The Signs of Safety model was developed in the 1990s in Western Australia by Turnell and Edwards (Turnell, 2012; Turnell & Edwards, 1999), and combines risk assessment with a strengths-oriented casework approach to move beyond risk control, based on the assumption that an overtly controlling approach leads to poor quality relationships with service users (Keddell, 2014). The implementation of the framework in Flanders relies on a three-column model of risk assessment that serves to distinguish and assess 'strengths', 'concerns' and 'complicating factors'. Whereas risks are framed as concerns for the future and balanced against strengths, the resources and networks of the families play an important role in supporting the family to achieve safety-oriented goals for the children. Complicating factors refer to aspects that make the safety of the child complex to deal with but are unlikely to change and do not require change for case closure to happen (for instance, mental health problems, drug abuse, poverty etc.) (see also Keddell, 2014). The trajectory with the family lasts as long as it takes to install the safety of the child, with regular evaluation throughout. In an ideal situation professionals can refer to resources using the SofS model, but in practice there often seems to be a lack of availability of resources (due to waiting lists etc.).

Although SofS has been widely adopted in many countries, there is very limited evidence that it leads to consistent and improved practice. A recent evaluation in the UK, for example, concerning aspects of effectiveness shows this lack of evidence in relation to workforce outcomes, quality and duration of assessments, and outcomes for children and families (Baginsky et al., 2019, 2020). Other research evidence on the implementation effects of SofS shows that the method 'stops structural aspects such as poverty or gender from being seriously considered as causative to the problem, or as targets for intervention' (Keddell, 2014, p. 75), thus reflecting the individualisation of broader structural problems that betray social work's commitment to social justice (Keddell, 2014; see also Spratt et al., 2019).

The Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders) however represents an interesting case. Compared to surrounding European countries, fairly distinctive responses to 'risk' in the system of child welfare and protection have historically emerged in Flanders (see Gilbert et al., 2011; Roose et al., 2014; Vyvey et al., 2014). The child welfare and protection system is traditionally strongly embedded in a children's rights discourse, focusing on family support, democratic forms of partnership, participation, and emancipation (Roets et al., 2013; Roose et al., 2014). This also means that dramatic incidents and scandals have less impact on policy and practice in Belgium. Belgium has been analysed as a country where the focus remains strongly on keeping calm while dealing with incidents in contextualised ways, adopting a down-to-earth and nuanced framing of incidents (Melssen & Jongmans, 2013).

The implementation of Sofs in Flanders was in a pilot phase since 2017, which shows that a stronger risk rhetoric has however entered the field with social workers being urged to be committed to the prevention of risks (Vyvey et al., 2014). The research project took place in a specific region in Belgium (West-Flanders), considering the active question of the Youth Welfare Agency to investigate their practices due to their vital commitment and efforts to develop poverty-aware practices while being confronted with the complex challenge of piloting the SofS approach.

Conceptual framework: technical-methodical or dialogical approaches to risk assessment

The relationship between a risk-focused paradigm in child welfare and protection practice and the implications for the reduction of poverty and social inequality has been the subject of recent contributions in social work research (see Morris et al., 2018; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019). The risk-focused paradigm often results in the promotion and implementation of forms of risk assessment as part of ongoing processes of professionalisation (Hood, 2014; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019; Scourfield & Welsh, 2003; Stanford, 2010). Approaches to risk assessment can nevertheless vary between standardisation, resulting in technical and diagnostic methods, tools, checklists and procedures, and more open-ended, qualitative and dialogic ways of assessing and interpreting the ambiguous meaning of risk (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Vyvey et al., 2014).

Technical-methodical approaches to risk assessment are mainly informed by principles of prevention, predictability, culpability and manageability of complexity and risk (Oak, 2016), and often vitalise 'the legitimacy of holding clients and social workers responsible when things go wrong' (Stanford, 2010, p. 1066). Risk assessment tools and checklists that are technical, diagnostic and pre-structured in nature also often contribute to a professional culture of surveillance and control, undermining social work's capacity to develop meaningful strategies in relation to complex situations (Oak, 2016; Vyvey et al., 2014). When social workers are investigating possible risks, research evidence shows there is often a focus on the individual behaviour and responsibility of parents, but not enough attention is drawn to tackling and improving the circumstances in which these risks occur, such as poverty and social inequality (Munro, 2010; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019).

In response, scholars increasingly call for alternative, poverty-aware approaches to child protection and welfare practice that situate tackling poverty and social inequality at the heart of everyday practice with families and children (Featherstone et al., 2018; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019). Rather than situating risks posed to children's wellbeing in parental deficit, poverty-aware approaches to child protection and welfare practice reconfigure risk as a contextual notion that is constituted by systemic factors as well, including social policies and structures that harm families (e.g. lack of social protection) (Keddell, 2014; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019). Moreover, as poverty is conceptualised as a complex and multifaceted experience of both material deprivation and more symbolic-relational experiences of stigmatisation, shame and powerlessness (Gupta, 2017; Lister, 2004), a poverty-aware child welfare and protection approach advocates dialogical and participatory risk assessment practice in an attempt to insert social justice agendas into practice, combining social and structural knowledge about risk with experience-based knowledge of parents and children themselves (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Roets et al., 2016; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019; Stanford, 2010). This requires social workers to deal more reflexively with risk and try to employ open-ended problem definitions of risk in complex situations as a starting point of dialogue with the involved families (Vyvey et al., 2014). Especially in situations of poverty, dialogical and participatory approaches to risk assessment are necessary to avoid blaming and othering of parents, perceiving 'risk' in more positive terms as generative of change and an opportunity to reclaim the emancipatory ethos that sits at the heart of the social work profession, since it can lead to democratic discussions about dilemmas, complexities and potential conflicts in the work with families (Gillingham, 2006; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019; Stanford, 2010). In that vein, Houston and Griffiths (2000) claim that risk should be approached while reinstating the subject in child welfare and protection practice as it may be more helpful to talk about understanding the families' concerns and circumstances such as poverty and social inequality. This concern and commitment might even enable professionals to critically and continuously (re)consider their framing of risky situations (Roets et al., 2013). Even mistakes can lead to reflections on how to 'speak back to fear' and employ the creative impetus and courage required to take and embrace risks in complex circumstances, such as poverty and social inequality, in practice (Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2019; Stanford, 2010).

Research methodology

Strategies of data collection

The study has been approved by the institutional ethical review board of our University before it started. We selected and recruited frontline social workers in two interrelated clusters of services within the Youth Welfare Agency where SofS is implemented by frontline social workers: the Youth Care Support Centres (YCSC) and the Social Service for Judicial Youth Care (SSJYC). The research project took place in West-Flanders, a region in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The region includes 9 teams (6Youth Care Support Centres and 3 Social Services for Judicial Youth Care), of which 2 Youth Care Support Centre teams (including respectively 5 and 13 participants), 2 Social Service for Judicial Youth Care teams (including respectively 8 and 7 participants), and 1 mixed team including frontline social workers of both Centres and Services (set up for critical reflection on children's rights and risks, including 5 participants) eventually participated in our research activities. The other 5 teams indicated that they could not participate due to a lack of time, lack of experience, or the small number of team members. All the team leaders and managers, in total 12, and the head of the department in this region, accepted our invitation to participate.

Two complementary research methods were applied: focus groups and semi-structured qualitative interviewing (see Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The combination of methods was required due to our efforts to encourage social workers to talk freely and extensively, to embrace the collective knowledge of frontline social workers, yet also to take into account the potentially hierarchical organisational power relationships between frontline social workers and team leaders and managers. Much attention was paid to ethical challenges inherent to the focus group method, and to discussing and guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity due to the unpredictable and sensitive nature of the discussions (Cyr, 2016). The focus groups and interviews were held in the work settings of the participants. The focus group method was the main research strategy due to its capacity to rely on the self-stimulating power of the teams to generate research insights as a result of dynamic interactions and discussions, which is not available through other methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). After obtaining a written informed consent from all the participants, we conducted 5 focus groups with frontline social workers (including in total 38 participants) and 13 qualitative interviews with their team leaders and managers. All the 7 team leaders, the 3 members of the Multidisciplinary Team (managers who provide active methodical assistance), the 2 managers specialised in Signs of Safety and the head of the department in the region were interviewed. The participants were mostly women, all different in age and years of experience. The same research issues and questions were presented to participants of the focus groups and of the individual interviews. The data collection activities took place between September 2017 and September 2018. The focus groups took an average of 1 h and 35 min, and the interviews lasted between 47 min and 2 h 18 min. All the interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and fully transcribed.

Strategies of data analysis

We undertook a qualitative content analysis of the data. Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1278) define this strategy of data analysis as a 'research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns'. We used this method as a sense-making effort to systematically analyse and identify core consistencies, broad themes, patterns and meanings which analytically summarises the content of the data in qualitative research material (Patton, 2002). Inspired by our conceptual framework and literature review, we analysed how the Flemish organisational policy of embracing both risks and rights and the implementation of SofS prompted frontline social workers to employ dialogical and poverty-aware rather than technical-methodical, poverty-blind approaches in situations of poverty. To ensure the trustworthiness, rigor and transparency of our analysis, we engaged in a triangulation of the

focus group and interview data and the analysis was constructed through an intensive process of peer review and debriefing in our research team having reflective conversations after every interview and on a regular basis while analysing the data. As a team, we took a prolonged and persistent engagement with diverse representatives of the Youth Welfare Agency who participated in our research activities during the process of data analysis. The formation of a feedback board in September 2018, including diverse representatives of the research participants, served as a strategy of member checking. During monthly meetings (September 2018-November 2019), we discussed the emerging findings and discussed drafts of the report with this feedback board to make sure that we accurately interpreted and represented their ideas, which resulted in an extensive report in Dutch (see Decoene et al., 2020). Our analysis is based on this report.

Findings

The research findings show that the social workers are not poverty-blind, but are aware of the complex poverty situations of the families. The majority of frontline social workers argue that they simply cannot ignore the socially unjust circumstances in which the families live. However, the strategies they develop to engage with this complexity are diverse. Based on the cross-analysis of all the data, we identified four strategies of discretion employed by frontline practitioners in dealing with risk in poverty situations.

Poverty as a complicating factor: parking the problem

Practitioners who use the three-column model to identify 'strengths', 'concerns' and 'complicating factors' argue that poverty is often set aside under the complicating factors. Some social workers call this 'parking the problem'. By doing this, the problem disappears into the background as merely a contextual issue:

> Poverty is perceived as a complicating factor rather quickly. And it is being parked a little bit in that way, so personally I feel that there is a lack of space for it. In the end, we usually do not work much with the complicating factors. We know that they are there, but we cannot do much about it and we start working with what we are concerned about (team leader SSJYC).

Some social workers go along with the organisational regulations and expectations, which leads to dismissing the overall presence of poverty. This 'parking' of the problem makes practitioners poverty-blind in the course of their interventions. In one focus group discussion, they indicate that they 'have become immune to that' (focus group SSJYC). This alienation of poverty as a structural problem becomes worse after a while; they argue they do not notice or value it anymore, and they are even surprised when they enter the home of a middle-class family. This confirms other research evidence on the implementation effects of SofS, revealing that SofS risks to do 'little to address the causes of the causes' (Spratt et al., 2019, p. 13), representing a 'dressing obscuring the greater wound' or the structural factors contributing to risk (Spratt et al., 2019, p. 14; see also Keddell, 2014). Practitioners moreover tend to detach the situation of the child from the situation of parents and the family's resources. Some of them want to intervene in more controlling ways since the parents' situation automatically affects the situation of the child:

> We focus on the children, but we dismiss the adults. […] We are not responsible for the parents, we are responsible for the children. We cannot take a parent by the hand and say: 'You have to do that now!' (team leader SSJYC).

Recent studies however indicate the importance of overcoming binaries between parents' versus children's rights, simultaneously recognising parents as partners and children as knowledgeable social actors capable of expressing their 'best interest', and of the child protection interventions that can support them in working towards it (Heimer et al., 2018; Toros, 2021; Van Bijleveld et al.,

2015). Some practitioners are convinced that poverty cannot be detached from the family situation since it represents an all-encompassing problem. By naming poverty as a complicating factor, they argue this does not mean by definition that you have to 'park' the problem; a lack of specific safety-oriented goals attached to the poverty problem does not prevent them from attempting to do something about it:

> You can work on safety with a mother, but as long as she does not have money for proper housing, or a father cannot provide material resources for what the children need, the problems remain (team leader Social Service for Judicial Youth Care).

Other practitioners are critical of the concept 'complicating factor', arguing that eventually everything will become a complicating factor and there will be no more concerns. They name it a new 'hype'. Some frontline workers critically refuse that they just have to wait until the situations get out of hand. As one of them argued about a child who had dental problems:

> Do you have to wait until it becomes a concern, until that child suffers from a lot of pain? No. It is a right that this child is also followed up medically (focus group YCSC).

Poverty as a concern: putting more lights around the family

Some professionals name poverty as a 'concern' within the framework. Concerns are linked to specific safety-oriented goals the parents (and their network) must achieve. The framework prescribes that these concerns, but also the parents' strengths, should be acknowledged and the frontline workers' job entails that parents and their network should be made responsible for (re)gaining these strengths. Poverty is often named as a concern when the safety of the child is in danger due to the unacceptable situation the family lives in, for example when there is no (proper) food for the child or when their housing situation is so precarious that it becomes a risk. Practitioners tackle the individualisation of poverty as a broader structural problem:

> It is always a consideration […] whether this poverty is a theme that we continue to take with us throughout the file or not. If we do not take it with us, if that does not block the safety of that child, then that can be a problem, but then we encourage that mother to seek help or to look within her network for that. But it's a difficult one (focus group YCSC).

SofS, however, prescribes there is no such thing as not having strengths or not having a network. The social workers use different metaphors to explain this. One metaphor, coming from a SofS course, is the 'lamp metaphor', here described by a team leader:

> The lamp is broken and you are trying to repair it. But that does not work at all and you're there all the time dabbling to make that lamp go on. But let us have a look, maybe if you put a few lights around, you will have an equally bright light (team leader YCSC).

In practice, the social workers thus sense that it is very hard to only rely on the network and when there is some sort of network, it is often very limited, brittle and/or unreliable. They also see a slightly dangerous side to SofS strengths-based approach. It can give families a sense of guilt if they do not succeed in reaching the predetermined goals because the power to bring social change is located within themselves and their network.

Although the implementation of SofS predominantly entails that poverty should not be named as a concern, some frontline workers do name it a concern. It all depends on how you name it, they say. They just give it a twist so they can work with it:

> I have a file that I should actually close. The safety of the child is guaranteed there, but that mother is really in misery financially. And I then just keep that file open to request financial support for the animated playground for every holiday. And I give it a twist in that file, otherwise the child will never be able to go to the playground again because she cannot afford it. (focus group Youth Care Support Centre).

It can be argued that the 'keep calm and carry on' culture in Flanders tends to result in more open-ended, reflexive and dialogical assessments, using the ambiguity of 'risk' as a way of taking concerns of the families into account (Broadhurst et al., 2010). However, some of them argue that it is nearly impossible to work with all these problems because of the heavy caseload they already struggle with.

Poverty as an undercover concern for social workers

Other social workers develop covert and informal strategies of discretion (see Fine & Teram, 2013; Boone et al., 2018b). Our research study reveals the undercover emergence of charitable and ad hoc actions as part of informal strategies of frontline workers. These actions tend to take place outside the guidelines of their formal mandate and therefore outside the guidelines of the SofS method. Practitioners give shape to different forms of action, such as giving old clothes and furniture to the families they work with, making phone calls for them, lending small amounts of money, doing groceries for the family, or sparing the parents from extra transport costs by organising a home visit or driving them to see their children in out-of-home care. How far they go with their actions varies:

> I am now going to commit myself in that situation. I am now looking at it and actually the formal judgement was: 'Complicating factors'. […] But then I think: this girl is surviving [in juvenile court]. She is in that [boarding] school and she has nothing. There was a bed there, I came into that room: 'And you do not have a duvet and a pillow?' 'No, I do not have that.' Well, I'm looking for that now, to make sure there's a duvet and a pillow. And actually it's not allowed to do that. It's only when we think outside the box that such things can happen (focus group YCSC).

Talking about these actions in one focus group discussion, the social workers argue wholeheartedly: 'No! You can get in trouble for doing these things so you do it in silence.' Another team feels that they could tell their team leader about their actions but they do it without bothering to tell anyone. If these actions become overt, professionals are sometimes subjected to remarks from their team leaders and supporters or colleagues. The frontline workers in the focus group discussions are sometimes surprised to hear that their colleagues engaged in such informal actions as well. They indicate that they are happy to hear that they are not the only ones doing this:

> I am happy to hear that all my colleagues dare to colour outside the lines. I think that is the only thing that benefits the families. And I think everyone does that here. That makes me happy! (focus group YCSC).

Thus in general, social workers do not really talk about these informal actions, either with their team leaders and supporters or between colleagues.

Another form of informal action can be distinguished. Professionals also often approach charitable organisations. Charities such as service clubs provide material help to people in poverty. But although such help can make a big difference for the families in poverty, some frontline workers question the way these organisations work. Although these initiatives have good intentions, they often offer temporary and limited support and, according to some, often have perverse and undesirable effects:

> For example, the charity organisation has very good intentions, and she [a mother] goes there [because] she could go to the [shoe store] to buy shoes for her children. When she arrives at the cashpoint, they take those shoes out of the box and put them in a separate bag. She asks: 'Why is that shoe box not allowed?', 'Yes madam, it's because you would not resell that to buy something for yourself.' That's humiliating (member of the Multidisciplinary Team).

Strategies of dealing with poverty as ad hoc and informal acts of limited material support (e.g. by charitable organisations) leaves families vulnerable to 'micro-aggressions' causing feelings of humiliation, shame and guilt about their situation and risks to dismiss the symbolic-relational dimensions of poverty altogether (Frost, 2016; Gupta, 2017). These charitable actions do not offer structural solutions and contribute towards socially unjust practices:

> Actually, that seems a bit perverse to me. Charity organisations also want to meet those people and there must be some gratitude of the clients. 'You should be glad that we have financial help for you here.' And I think that's terrible. But you need it. We have to go through this and I say that to the families as well. But actually that is not socially just (focus group YCSC).

Poverty as a social problem that requires structural responses

Since the Youth Welfare Agency only deals with concerns that are linked to specific safety-oriented goals, frontline social workers develop informal strategies to refer families to other organisations for dealing with the complicating factors and make alliances with other welfare services such as the Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW) and the Centre for General Welfare Work (CAW), which have a mandate to provide, for example, financial resources to the families. But frontline workers feel as though the families are sent from pillar to post and therefore often take up the work themselves and/or approach other welfare organisations that can help:

> Of course, poverty is not our core business. […] But poverty is for the moment not a hot item, so we refer clients to CAW, to OCMW, and to a thousand of other organisations who have to deal with that. But you cannot disconnect the poverty problem from the other problems. One can go along with the mother but when she or the father has no money for housing or for the basic needs of the children, then problems remain. So we surely engage other services (team leader SSJYC).

These collaborations can be ad hoc or happen on a structural basis. Besides the scope of these alliances, there are influential differences depending on which region the family lives in. Moreover, making these alliances seems rather difficult. Social workers are unfamiliar with possible partners, and even when there are partners, the practitioners of the Youth Welfare Agency experience a lot of fragmentation within the welfare landscape. Everyone is mainly concerned with their own task and mandate, and they hardly know what the other organisations are responsible for. However, in the direct engagement with families in situations of poverty, they notice that cooperation and shared responsibility with other services is very important for supporting them:

> I think if we do it ourselves, we would be doing it better. And that is not the case. So if it can be shared and each can take responsibility, even though we are here in the judicial system, you can cooperate and network with the field of frontline social work in a good way (team leader SSJYC).

Although professionals stress the importance of cooperation with other organisations, there are only a few examples of such structural responses. One of the social workers mentions an example of a protocol that was signed in a specific city. The initiator of this kind of structural cooperation wants to keep it small-scale (e.g. on the city level) and local because it is all fairly new and informed by a belief in the workability of this scale:

> We signed a protocol with that organisation in which we made arrangements […] We agreed on a roadmap in which we ask our clients to give their consent (member of the Multidisciplinary Team).

Although the practitioners search for other services to deal with poverty, they are often confronted with the fact that other organisations in the welfare landscape see themselves as restricted. In that case, they formulate the need to cooperate as an obstacle in situations in which they need other organisations:

> I can now actually name files where I think the societal necessity is not the problem of families who do not want to cooperate, but the goals are not achieved because the services refuse to cooperate (focus group YCSC).

It also causes frustration when practitioners do refer to other services but experience a lack of continuity because these organisations stress their limitations. The more services specialise and limit their own role, the less public responsibility emerges:

> Services that can work out of the box are the most valuable ones. Services that are less bound by procedures. These are the most valuable services to get at the [network] tables. […] (focus group YCSC).

The social workers, however, argue that the Youth Welfare Agency should take responsibility:

> But the Youth Welfare Agency has to take up its responsibility. […] Organisations look at each other. Services are bound by their region or by their mandate. And now […] we continue to do our own thing, expecting too much from the others (focus group Youth Care Support Centre).

Conclusion

Our research study aimed to investigate whether frontline social workers employ dialogical and poverty-aware rather than technical-methodical, poverty-blind approaches in situations of poverty when they implement SofS, within the context of the Flemish Youth Welfare organisational policy of embracing both risks and rights. Our study has important limitations. First of all, our findings concern the perspectives of frontline social work and their team leaders and managers, but dismisses the life knowledge of families in poverty situations as well as extended knowledge of managers on the organisational level (see Krumer-Nevo, 2005; Boone et al., 2018b). Another limitation of our study involves the regional basis of the findings. Since the research project has been implemented in one region of Flanders, it might be necessary to examine whether the qualitative findings about social work interventions might also be trustworthy in the four other regions in Flanders, where concentrations of poverty and social inequality might be different (see Bywaters et al., 2015).

Our research findings mainly show that the diverse strategies of discretion of social workers are largely dependent on the organisational context, with reference to the interaction and possible gap between formal organisational policy expectations and the ways they are implemented in frontline practice (Carson et al., 2015). When frontline practice develops subtle forms of (undercover) resistance, the Youth Welfare Agency, as a governmental organisation, does not overtly consider poverty a negotiable issue and a key focus for their work. The implementation of the SofS method as a framework for action thus seems to represent a symbolic vehicle that serves organisational policy in the implementation of a rather hegemonic project (see Garrett, 2008). This hegemony stays on the one hand untouched by the invisible strategies of frontline social workers who seek to support families in poverty situations in ways that are not in line with the formal organisational policy guidelines. There is a lack of space, trust and support to talk openly about the perceived injustices they experience in their work with the families, and they engage in informal strategies to deal with poverty within their work (see Fine & Teram, 2013; Smith, 2007). As such, poverty itself remains invisible, while poverty-aware frontline practices also stay invisible.

In other words, rather than framing poverty as the wallpaper of frontline practice – the problem of poverty being too big to tackle and too familiar to notice (see Morris et al., 2018)– we could argue that it is this complexity and struggle at stake in frontline practice that becomes wallpaper for child welfare and protection organisational policy in Flanders. Indeed, research has stressed that space to embrace risk in open-minded and dialogical ways requires an organisational culture and climate that captures, fosters and creates formal as well as informal conditions in which professionals can engage in discussions and develop a commitment to address complex situations (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Evans, 2011; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). Hence, our main research finding is that child welfare and protection organisational policies should open up the space to engage with the complexity of social problems (Schiettecat et al., 2017).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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